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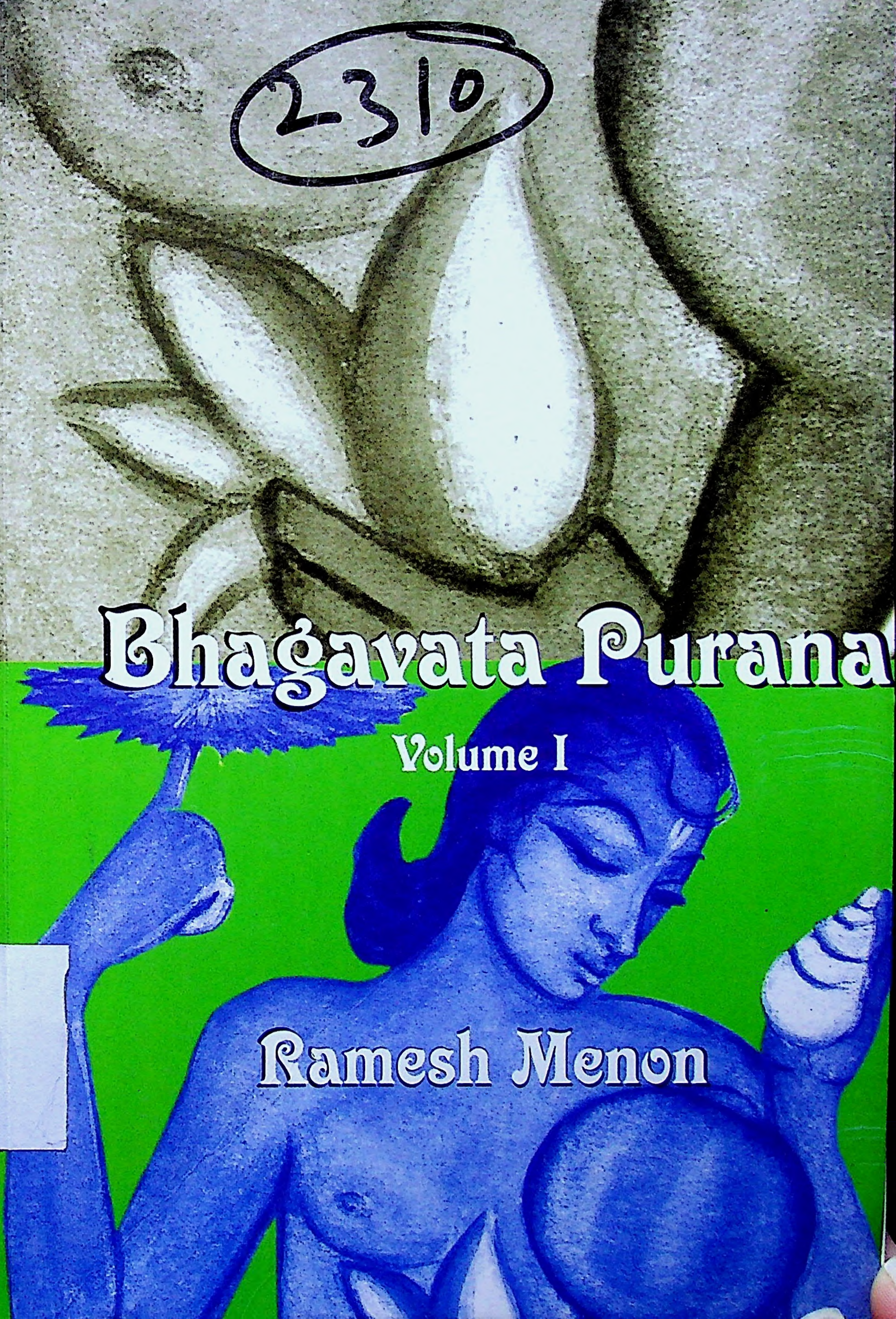

Bhagavata Purana

Volume I

Ramesh Menon

BHAGAVATA PURANA

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VOLUME ONE

RAMESH MENON

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Skandha 1

IN THE NAIMISA VANA

IN THE SACRED AND ENCHANTED FOREST, THE NAIMISA, SAUNAKA prostrates himself before the Suta Romaharshana, and says, 'The sinister kali yuga advances day by day. Evil shrouds the world in darkness, and everywhere demons rule.

Your wisdom is as a million suns, master. Light the lamps of our wisdom, tell us how to save ourselves from the terrors of this macabre age. Tell us how we can have the grace of the Lord Krishna even in this wretched time.'

Suta replies, 'Saunaka, there is love in your heart, and you will find grace. Vyasa's son, the blessed Suka, has left us the holy *Bhagavata Purana*, to help us cross every distress of the kali yuga.

This Bhagavatam is no ordinary scripture. When Suka first told it to Parikshit, all the Devas arrived in that king's court. The Gods brought a chalice full of amrita, the nectar of immortality, offered it to Suka and asked for the Bhagavata in return.

Suka laughed, "How can this amrita compare with the Bhagavatam? It is like comparing a glass bead with the chintamani!"

He refused to give them the Bhagavatam, which is called the secret Purana, because they were not true bhaktas of the Lord Vishnu. So the Devas themselves do not have the immortal Purana.

But Suka recited the Bhagavatam to Parikshit over a week, and even Brahma wondered at how Parikshit found moksha by just listening. As Brahma returned to Satyaloka, he weighed in his mind all the paths to nirvana, and found that this one, the Bhagavatam, was easily the heaviest. He realised, in amazement, that this Purana was a living embodiment of the Lord Vishnu Himself.'

The Suta pauses thoughtfully, then says, 'Of course, before Suka, Narada Muni received the Bhagavatam from his father, the Lord Brahma. This was after the ever youthful Rishis, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara and Sanatana, told Narada that listening to the Bhagavatam for a week confers illumination.'

Saunaka wanted to know, 'How did Sanaka and Sananda first mention the Bhagavatam to Narada?'

Suta says, 'You must not tell anyone what I am about to divulge to you. Suka Muni considered me his sishya, and he told me this in the strictest confidence.'

NARADA AND BHAKTI

'ONCE, SANAKA, SANANDA, SANATKUMARA AND SANATANA, THE FOUR Kumaras, and some other sinless Rishis arrived in Badarikasrama, on earth, and saw Narada there, disconsolate.

Sanaka greeted Narada and asked, "Muni, why are you so downcast? And you seem to be hurrying away already."

Narada answered him, "Knowing that this Bhumi is the best of all the worlds in the universe, I came here to worship at its sacred tirthas. I went to Pushkara, Prayaga, Kasi, to the Godavari, Haridwara, Kurukshetra, Sriranga, and Rameswara; but at none of these holiest places did I find any peace or grace.

Ah, my friends, this earth has truly been seized by the demonic kali, and there remains no place where one may find truth, purity, meditation, compassion or liberality."

Narada was most distraught, as he continued. "Everywhere, men are only concerned about filling their bellies, and hoarding wealth. They lie and cheat one another.

They have lost their discrimination, and become dull and foolish. Even those that call themselves Rishis and sannyasis are charlatans – as entangled in samsara as all the rest.

Women and property are their true concerns, not the life of the spirit. The old ways have all but disappeared from everyday life. Men sell their daughters for greed. Husbands and wives live in strife, always quarrelling.

Young women rule their husbands' homes, with no regard for what the elders say. One's wife's brother becomes a counsellor, whose advice prevails in all matters.

Foreigners inhabit the holiest tirthas and asramas. The most sacred temples have been desecrated and corrupted by them. No yogis, men with any real mystic powers, remain in the land of Bharata to bless the kingdoms and the people.

The holy orders of Guru and sishya have vanished. Men live by selling food, and women by prostitution, of one form or other."

He sighed deeply, in great distress, "I wandered the length and breadth of the Holy Land of Bharata, and saw evil rooted everywhere, and the ascendancy of hatred over love.

In some anguish, I came to the banks of the Yamuna, where my Lord Krishna once grew, where he sported with his friends and his lovers.

Sages, there I saw a young woman, seated on the banks of the river. She was graceful and exquisite, but she was as wan as a wilted lotus.

Near her on the white sand, lay two ancient men, as if lifeless. Their eyes were shut, and their breathing was heavy and stertorous. The young woman fanned their faces, desperately; she sprinkled water on their cheeks, and spoke to them, trying to awaken them.

She shed tears, but the old men did not stir. I saw a host of other women, all of unearthly beauty, trying to reassure her, but she wept without pause, and was inconsolable.

Then she looked up and saw me, and gave a glad cry. Springing to her feet, stumbling towards me, she said, 'What fortune, Muni, that you have come here!'

I asked her, 'Lovely one, who are you? And who are these two old men, and who are these beautiful women that surround you?'

She sighed deeply, and said, 'I am called Bhakti. I am Devotion. These two old ones are Gyana and Vairagya; they are my sons. But they were born many ages ago, and they have grown old and worn.'

Now she indicated the lissom women around her. 'These are Ganga and the other sacred rivers. They have come to comfort me, but I find no solace even in their company.'

She paused, and wiped a tear, before continuing, 'Muni, listen to my story, even if it is a long one; I beg you, listen to my story, so I find some peace.'

She did not wait for me to agree, but went on, 'I was born in the Dravida country, and I grew to maturity in Karnataka. I was revered in the land of Maharashtra, but when I reached Gujarat, I became an old crone.

It was the kali yuga, Narada, which crippled me in all my parts, like a terrible disease. Somehow, I crawled here to Vrindavana with my sons, and instantly I was young again, and beautiful as you see me.

But look at my sons: they did not recover, but grew worse. Now I, their mother, look like their granddaughter. I am ashamed of this, Muni. I beg you, tell me how this has happened to us three.'

I looked into my own heart, where the Lord puts his wisdom and vision when he chooses, and I said to Bhakti, 'Pure, sinless one, do not be dejected. The Lord Hari will bring bliss into your life again.

This is indeed the kali yuga, when the good suffer endlessly, and the evil are exhilarant. The earth is so full of sin, that Anantasesha can hardly bear the weight of her anymore.

Nothing auspicious remains in the world, and men turn avidly to greed and lust, to thievery and murder. All that is sacred disappears from the world of men; no one cares, Devi, to even glance in your direction, or towards your sons. Your sons' stupor is because no one regards them anymore.'

Bhakti Devi asked in some anguish, 'But why did Parikshit establish this kali yuga on earth? So the righteous could suffer? And Evil prosper?

How does Hari, our Lord Vishnu, tolerate this terrible yuga? Ah, Narada, the very sound of your voice reassures me so, and I feel hope and faith spring in my heart again! Talk to me, Muni, tell me why evil chokes the world.'

I said to her, 'It was on the very day that Krishna left this world that the kali yuga flashed into it.

Parikshit alone saw the kali: as a sudra. He thought, "I must not kill this spirit, this beast, for it is only in the kali yuga that men and women can find moksha merely by chanting the names and recounting the legends of the Lord Vishnu Narayana, who lies upon the waters of eternity."

For sure, the kali yuga lacks every other virtue; in this age all things lose their innate grace. Yet, this is the only yuga in which the very name of the Lord can set a man free.

Certainly, the kali is the age of darkness, when even the Bhagavatam has lost its inner sanctity from being recounted by evil brahmanas who want only to fill their already bloated bellies.

Why, I say to you, even those reborn into the world from Raurava, the hell for the worst sinners of all, occupy the sanctums of the holiest temples, and distribute offerings to deluded masses! How can the sanctity of these temples remain?

Men whose minds are full of passion, greed and violence sit in dhyana. The blessing of dhyana has left the earth. Those who call themselves Rishis and Munis and sannyasis are adept at procreation.

They are serpents, hypocrites who are a disgrace to the true path of the Shastras. They know little of and care less for salvation and its means. They are fiends who deceive the gullible people about the nature of the greatest truths, about the nature of the soul.

Here are men who say that they worship the Lord Vishnu. But I say to you, nowhere on earth is Vishnu worshipped truly anymore, as in the old days, and by the ancient sects.

Why, worship and everything sacred has perished long ago. This is the nature of the kali yuga. No one is to blame; these are the times, just as God has willed them to be.

Thus, the Lord tolerates all the sin in which we are shrouded; he forgives it because whatever happens does so by his will.'

Bhakti looked faintly startled to listen to what I said to her. She spoke in a low voice, 'Muni, truly, truly, it is my great fortune that you have come to this place and found me here!'

I said to her, 'Dear Bhakti, don't let anxiety have its way with you. Remember Krishna is always with you. He loves you more than you know, and he will never abandon you.

In the krita yuga, the treta and the dwapara, gyana and dhyana conferred nirvana. But in this vile kali, only bhakti can save one's soul. This, more than any other, is your age, Bhakti Devi.

Have you forgotten how you once asked Krishna, "Lord, what shall I do now?" And he made Mukti your handmaiden, and Gyana and Vairagya your sons.

When heresy and darkness enveloped the earth in the kali yuga, like some horrible sickness, Mukti was direly afflicted, and you sent her back to Vaikuntha.

Yet, whenever you summon her she returns to the earth to liberate some deserving soul or other, and then goes back to Vishnu's realm. And these two, your sons, they are wasting.

But no matter: you, Devi Bhakti, shall be worshipped above every other Goddess in this kali yuga. Why, you shall be the only way to salvation.

Those that say the kali yuga is an age of evil forget that this wonderful age is the yuga when moksha is nearest. I say to you, Bhakti, this is the most wonderful of all the ages of men!

Enough of the keeping of vows and rituals! Have done with tirtha-yatras! No more yoga or yagnas! Forget the great discourses on the different paths to salvation.

Who needs the Vedas or Shastras in the kali yuga? You, Bhakti, alone shall be the way to salvation.'

Bhakti glowed. She said to me, 'I will never abandon you, Muni! You have allayed all my fear. But look at my sons, they are still inert. Help them if you can, holy one, I beg you.'

I began to rub the faces of Gyana and Vairagya; I chanted the Vedas and the Upanishads in their ears. I sang the Bhagavad Gita, the Song of God, to them, and slowly they sat up, yawning, but not opening their eyes.

Their heads were as white as the feathers of a crane; their limbs were wasted, like dry twigs. I was worried, and I prayed to my Lord Vishnu.

At once, an asariri spoke to me from the sky, 'Don't be anxious, Narada, but find the Munis, who are jewels of their kind, who will tell you how to revive Gyana and Vairagya. And once they are revived, Narada, be certain that bhakti will spread across the earth like light under the sun.'

I fell to wondering where I would find the Sages who were jewels of their kind. I set out from the banks of the Yamuna to discover them. And on this quest, Munis, I came here to the Badarikasrama. I have decided to sit here in tapasya, until I know how Gyana and Vairagya can be renewed."

Narada gazed at the Rishis before him, the Kumaras. They looked like children, but he knew they were older than the earth herself, older than the eldest stars in the sky. A great hope surged in Narada: he knew these were the jewels of their kind of whom the asariri had spoken,' says Suta.

THE SECRET PURANA

SUTA SAYS, 'NARADA SAID, "MUNIS, TELL ME HOW I CAN REVIVE GYANA and Vairagya, and spread bhakti through the rotting world."

Sanaka Muni answered Narada, "O sun among Rishis, it is only the recitation of the Bhagavatam that can revive Bhakti's sons. As wolves are silenced by the lion's roar, so too are the sins of this kali yuga by the sound of the Lord's Bhagavatam."

Narada said, "But the Vedas and the Upanishads, even the Bhagavad Gita did not enliven the sons of Bhakti Devi."

Sanaka replied, "Yet the Bhagavatam shall rouse them, for the secret Purana is the essence of all the Vedas and Upanishads, and of the Bhagavad Gita, too. Narada, it is the fruit of all those ancient and sacred trees; truly it is your Lord Mahavishnu himself."

Narada smiled, "Munis, I have heard the only nectar you drink is the sound of the secret Purana, recited by Anantasesha from his thousand mouths! I will try to revive Bhakti's sons with the Bhagavatam. But tell me where I should undertake the yagna to recite Suka's secret scripture."

"Near Gangadvara is a place called Ananda, where countless Rishis live, and where Devas and siddhas come to worship. Golden lotuses grow on the waters of the Ganga here, and such powerful grace is upon all of Ananda, that the tiger and the deer lie side by side there.

You must perform your gyana yagna there. You will see that the Bhagavatam acquires unprecedented resonance and sweetness when we recite it in Ananda. Surely, Bhakti and her sons will come to you on the banks of the Ganga, and they shall be revived. Come, Muni, we will take you to Ananda ourselves."

They set out immediately, and arrived quickly, since they travelled by the aerial paths of the Rishis. The news spread like light across swarga, bhumi and patala that the Kumara Munis would recite the Lord's Bhagavata Purana on the banks of the Ganga.

The holiest Sages came swarming to that auspicious place to drink of the ambrosial Purana – Bhrigu, Vasishta, Chyvana, Gautama, Medhatithi, Devala, Devaratha, Parasurama, Viswamitra, Sakala, Markandeya, Dattatreya, Pippalada, Vamadeva, the lord of Yoga, Vyasa and Parasara, and another throng, why a fair multitude of Sages, led by Jajali and Jahnu.

All of them came with their wives and their children, longing to listen to the ambrosial Bhagavata Purana.

The deities of the Upanishad arrived there at Ananda; the four Vedas came, embodied, as did the greatest and holiest Mantras, such as the enlivening Sanjivana; the Tantras came, and the seventeen other Puranas.

The holy rivers, Ganga the foremost of them, arrived at Narada's yagna; so did the most sacred lakes, like Pushkara and Manasasarovara. The greatest fields of grace came in splendour, Kurukshetra and the others; the great and ancient forests, Dandaka and the rest, arrived, numinous spirits.

Golden, splendid Meru, magnificent Himavan, and all the other mountains of the earth arrived with their trains of peaks; Indra's Devas came, as did Chitraratha's eleven gandharvas; and the kinnaras and kimpurushas came.

Bhrigu, who is the Guru, fetched those who had not come to Ananda where Narada meant to bring Gyana and Vairagya back to life, and to return joy to Bhakti's heart.

At Ananda, the Sages of youth, Sanaka, Sanatkumara, Sananda, and Sanatana had already taken the initiatory vows for the sacrifice. They sat in front, nearest the sacred agni that blazed in its pit.

Being the sacrificer, Narada sat before them. A battery of conches was blown, and bright showers of camphor, vermilion and sandal powder were flung into the air, with grains of rice and whole seasons of flowers.

Deafening cries of Jaya! rent the crisp air. Some Devas flew their vimanas over the yagnashala, raining blooms from unworldly kalpavrikshas over the august gathering.

When everyone sat, the Kumaras began to sing the Bhagavata Purana to Narada in ringing voices. "Listen to the glory of the Bhagavata Purana of the Lord, known as the Suka Shastra. Those who hear it hold moksha in the palms of their hands.

The Lord Hari fills one's heart if one listens to the Bhagavatam, which has eighteen thousand verses, which is divided into twelve skandhas, and which is a conversation between Yudhishtira's grandson, the king Parikshit, and the Sage Suka.

No scripture but the Bhagavata proclaims that it can bestow nirvana by just being heard. A home in which the Bhagavatam is recited becomes like a temple, and burns every sin of those who live in it.

Why, a thousand Aswamedhas and Vajapeyas do not compare with listening once to the Bhagavatam. Not the Ganga, not Gaya, Kasi, Pushkara or Prayaga is as holy as the Bhagavata Purana.

The wise make no difference between Pranava, which is AUM, the Gayatri Mantra, the Purusha Sukta, the three Vedas (Rik, Saman and Yajus), the Bhagavata Purana, the mantra of twelve syllables (*Auṃ Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*), Surya Deva who appears in twelve forms, Kaala who is Time, the best brahmanas, agnihotra, Surabhi, the twelfth day of the bright and dark halves of the month, the Tulasi, the months of Chaitra and Visakha – no difference between all these and the Lord Mahavishnu!

The sins of a million lives are made ashes by reading or hearing the Bhagavatam every day. To the man who hears even a sentence from the Bhagavatam as he dies, the Lord Vishnu grants a place in Vaikuntha.

But then, the Bhagavatam is the rarest of all the rare treasures of this earth; and a soul has to be born a crore of times before he can attain to it.

O Narada, great Yogin, one may read or hear the sacred Bhagavatam at any time of day or night, on any day, in any season, at any age of one's life!

It was once said that one should be celibate and utterly truthful while listening to the sacred Bhagavatam. But we know both these are impossible for long periods of time in this kali yuga, and so Sri Suka has said we need only be pure for a week, and read or hear the transcendent Purana out in that time.

Narada Muni, Suka's Purana is the most perfect scripture of all; why, it is perfection embodied, it is the Lord Himself," sang the Kumaras to Narada at Ananda,' says Suta Romaharshana to Saunaka and his Rishis in the Naimisa vana.

Now Saunaka asks, 'How is it that, in this kali yuga, listening to the Bhagavatam excels all the virtues and rituals prescribed for the earlier ages?'

Suta replies, 'When Krishna was about to leave this world, at the end of his incarnation, his cousin and friend Uddhava said to him, "Oh, Krishna, you will go blithely from this world, but my mind is full of fear.

The dreadful kali yuga is about to begin. Evil will rise up and seize the earth again. Even the good will become cruel and vicious just by their association with the demonic ones.

Krishna, what will happen to our sacred earth? To whom will she turn for refuge? Lord, how will your bhaktas continue living in this darkening world when you have left it?

Who will be our light in the gathering night? You are the formless Brahman who has assumed a form of sheer delight that we can worship easily. When you return to formlessness, it will be hard to think of you, Krishna, to love you as we do now.

Leave us a tangible form in which we can find you, touch you, be near you!"

Krishna thought about this for a moment, and then he entered into the Bhagavata Purana with all his being. To read the Bhagavatam is to be with blue Krishna!'

Suta pauses a moment, then continues, 'As the Kumara Munis sang the Bhagavatam at Ananda, a miracle occurred there. Suddenly, in a flash of light, the Devi Bhakti appeared in the midst of Narada's yagnashala.

With her were her sons Gyana and Vairagya, but now they were young men again, handsome and full of vitality. How their limbs rippled with health and their faces shone!

In some ecstasy all three cried out the names of the Lord, over and over again. Murari! they sang. Oh Hari! Oh Vishnu! Oh Krishna! Oh Govinda!

Bhakti prostrated herself before Sanatkumara and the other sons of Brahma, and said, "Lords, you have healed us of the afflictions of the kali yuga with the amrita of the Bhagavatam! Tell us where we should go now, where we should dwell."

Sanatkumara replied, "Dwell in the hearts of the devotees of the Lord Vishnu. Help them cross the turbid sea of samsara."

And so it was – Bhakti and her sons Gyana and Vairagya entered the hearts of the Blue God's bhaktas, and she lives there since, showing them the way to freedom, the sure, short way of devotion.

As soon as she was ensconced in their hearts, another miracle – Vishnu Narayana appeared before the gathering.

He was the hue of the lotus that blooms in the deepest forests; he wore a brilliant wildflower garland, a vanamala, around his neck; he wore fulvid pitambara robes, and the reverberant red ruby, the kaustubha, on his breast.

He had a flute in his hand, and he was Satchitananda incarnate: truth, consciousness and bliss. He was irresistible; he was Mukti embodied.

Instantly, the gathering was absorbed in him. Ecstasy swept them; they forgot themselves, and became him. All their sins vanished, leaving them as the brightest crystal,' says Suta Romaharshana to Saunaka and the other Sages in the Naimisa vana.

Saunaka asks, 'You said that Vyasa's son Suka first told the Bhagavata Purana to Parikshit of the Kurus. Then the Kumara Munis recited it for Narada, Bhakti and her sons.

I have heard of a third time when the hermetic Purana was told at a great yagna: by the Rishi Gokarna. Tell us, Suta, when did these three expositions of the Bhagavatam take place?'

Romaharshana replies, 'Thirty years passed after Krishna left the earth, and the demonic kali yuga entered our world. It was the ninth day of the bright half of the month of Bhadrapada, when Suka began reciting the Bhagavatam to Parikshit.

Two hundred years more of the kali yuga went by, after Parikshit first heard the Lord's Purana, and then Gokarna Muni began his week-long rendition of the Bhagavatam on the ninth day of the bright half of the month of Ashada.

Thirty years passed, after Gokarna's narration of the Bhagavatam, and Narada found the wasted Bhakti and her unconscious sons on the banks of the Yamuna, near Vrindavana. Sanatkumara, Sanaka, Sananda, and Sanatana began their recitation of the Bhagavatam on the ninth morning of the bright fortnight of the month of Karttika.'

Saunaka wants to know, 'Tell us about Gokarna Muni. Who was he? Why did he have such an unusual name?'

ATMAVEDA, THE BRAHMANA

SUTA BEGINS THE STORY OF THE GREAT GOKARNA. 'IN ANCIENT TIMES, purer times than these, on the banks of the Tungabhadra stood a fine township, whose people lived just and devout lives, always speaking the truth, and observing varnasrama, though the kali yuga had advanced some two hundred years.

In this town lived the pious brahmana, Atmaveda, who was a fine scholar of the Vedas and the Smritis. He lived by alms and by conducting yagnas for those who wanted sacrifices performed; and by the generous offerings he received, he was a wealthy man.

Atmaveda married Dhundhuli, a beautiful girl from a good family; but hers wasn't entirely a good character. She did her housework well enough, but she loved gossiping more than she should, and was miserly and unkind.

Atmaveda and Dhundhuli had no children, and the brahmana became obsessed by this. He began to give away gold and land as charity, hoping to appease the Gods, so they would bless him with a child.

Atmaveda gave away half of everything they owned, but Dhundhuli did not conceive. One day, in a fit of dejection, the brahmana walked out of his house, and wandered blindly along, until he came to the forest which grew not far from the little town.

On he walked, deep into the vana, and near noon came to a tank of clear water. He was thirsty and drank from cupped palms. Then he sank down beside the tank in deep listlessness.

After a while, he heard soft footsteps approach. He saw a sannyasi had arrived in the clearing, and was now drinking from the bright tank. Atmaveda allowed the hermit to finish drinking, then he lunged forward, fell at the holy one's feet, and sobbed piteously.

The sannyasi asked, "Why do you cry, my son?"

"Ah, I am a cursed man, Muni! My ancestors in heaven sigh into my dreams; they shed tears for me that I have no children. The Devas do not take the havis I offer them anymore.

If I plant a tree, it either withers or never bears fruit: because of my sins of lives gone by. What use is it being alive, when I have no sons or daughters? I wish the earth would open and swallow me! I want to drown myself in this tank!"

And he sobbed inconsolably.

The sannyasi was a trikalagyani. He could gaze into the past and the future. Moved by pity for Atmaveda, he peered deep, deep into the brahmana's past lives.

At last, he said gently, "Destiny is all powerful, Brahmana. I have seen your past lives, and the karma you have gathered from them. My son, you will not have any children for this life and seven more.

Best that you control your craving and seek the salvation of your soul. Besides, having a son is no guarantee of having happiness. Think of the grief his sons brought king Sagara. Look to become a sannyasi; there lies your true happiness."

But Atmaveda hardly listened. He cried, "Muni, you are a man of great power. But your fine advice is of no use to me; words of wisdom will not quench the need of a man dying of thirst.

Bless me with a son, Muni, or leave me to die here. The sannyasi who renounces the world without tasting its greatest pleasures, of having children and grandchildren, is no renouncer, he is only a hypocrite."

The sannyasi said, "You know what happened to king Chitraketu, whose destiny was like yours. But he tried to change it with the great Angiras' help, and was damned to terrible sorrow.

Angiras performed a putrakama yagna for him, and one of his legion wives conceived. A son was born to Chitraketu, but he was never meant to have a child. When the boy was hardly a week old, another wife poisoned the infant in a fit of jealousy.

Think calmly, beyond your blinding desire for a child. All that fate decrees for each of us is only what is best."

But Atmaveda howled, "A son, Muni, give me a son! A son is all I want, and nothing else will do."

The sannyasi sighed. He held out his hand, and suddenly a bright fruit lay in his open palm.

"Here, take this fruit to your wife, and she will bear you a son if she eats it. But remember, whatever happens after that is of your own making. Do not blame me if you inherit a grief you cannot endure."

Atmaveda's cry of joy rang through the trees. He took the fruit from the sannyasi, and fell to kissing the Sage's feet a hundred times.

The sannyasi warned him, "Nothing is more dangerous than to tempt fate as you insist on doing. Tell your wife she must keep a vow of truthfulness, kindness and charity for a year.

She must not eat more than one meal a day, and you will have a pure-hearted and pious child. But if she breaks any part of her vow, there is no telling what manner of monster will be born as your son."

The yogin paused, and now he smiled kindly at Atmaveda, who knelt before him. "Well, finally, everything that happens in this deep world happens for the best."

He seemed to scrutinise the young brahmana again with some occult faculty or sight. "Perhaps, in your case there is some exceptional destiny to be accomplished; perhaps you will have a Mahatman, a great soul for your son. Yes, it is possible, but I cannot see clearly and that future is hidden from me.

But take my blessing with you, young Brahmana, and be of good cheer, for a son you shall certainly have!"

The sannyasi laid his hand on Atmaveda's head, and walked away briskly from the tank. Atmaveda never saw him again. The jubilant brahmana went running to his wife with the precious fruit. He pressed it into her hands and told her all about his meeting with the holy man.

Kissing her excitedly, he cried, "Now I will be a father, and you a mother!"

Before he went out to draw water for his bath, he told her about the vow that she must keep if they were to have a good son. As Atmaveda bathed luxuriantly, he sang to himself, and gave loud thanks to the yogin and to all the Gods.

His pretty wife, though, was less than enthused. She confided to her friend who had come to visit, "I hate the thought of my belly bloating! And this will be a magical pregnancy. What will become of me if the child stays on in my womb as Suka Deva did?"

Vyasa's son had remained in his mother's womb for sixteen years after he was conceived.

Young Dhundhuli was also worried, "And what about the pain of childbirth? I have heard it is like dying! No, it is not for me. What's more, I will never be able to keep the vows of truth and kindness for a year. Imagine, me!"

She and her friend, who knew her well, went into splits of laughter at the very thought. Dhundhuli did not eat the Sage's fruit, but hid it away for the night. She would think the matter over the next morning. Later, when her husband asked her if she had eaten the fruit, she lied that she had.

The next morning, Dhundhuli's younger sister came to visit. She found Dhundhuli distraught and asked what the matter was. Bursting into tears, Dhundhuli told her about the fruit and how she did not want to become pregnant. Why, if she were laid up for even a day, her husband's meddlesome sister would usurp her place in the house.

Dhundhuli's sister had a solution. "I am pregnant," she said, "you can have my child. Give my husband some money and he will keep quiet about it."

They worked out the details between them, and also decided to feed the fruit to Dhundhuli's cow, to see how effective it was. The clever

Dhundhuli and her sister contrived to pretend that the younger woman had aborted, and the older delivered.

The sister's husband smuggled his own son into Dhundhuli's darkened apartment. Dhundhuli brought her sister's child to Atmaveda, as their own. He was overjoyed, and performed the jata karma, the baby's life passage rites.

He gave generous gifts to the other brahmanas at the ceremony, and there wasn't a happier man alive than Atmaveda. He named his son Dhundhukari.

Three months passed, and the cow that ate the fruit gave birth as well—to a human child! This was a resplendent infant; his eyes were like lotus petals, his skin was like gold.

Atmaveda was delighted at the miracle, and performed the jata karma for this child as well. The people flocked to his house to see the magical baby. This child was human in every aspect, but he had the long ears of a cow. They named him Gokarna.'

THE TWO BROTHERS

SUTA CONTINUES, 'THE TWO BOYS GREW UP TOGETHER, LIKE BROTHERS, but their characters were as different as day and night. Gokarna was a pure, devout child, a scholar who loved the scriptures; while Dhundhukari grew into a young villain.

Day by day, Dhundhukari plunged headlong down the way of sin, until there was no crime he had not committed. He ate meat, which was taboo for a brahmana, drank, stole, gambled, whored and fought.

He had a fierce temper and a violent nature. He committed arson. He molested children; and then he murdered them secretly, for the thrill it gave him.

The prostitutes of the town were his constant companions, and once he beat up his father and mother, and stole from them to pay his whores.

Atmaveda remembered the warning of the sannyasi in the forest, bitterly. He cursed himself for having such a son.

Gokarna was his only solace. The wise child gently quoted the scriptures to his father, and advised him to cultivate dispassion. He told Atmaveda the only solution to his troubles was to renounce the world, and become a Rishi in the forest. Gokarna said fate was showing him the way, with pain.

Finally, when he could not bear to see the monster that Dhundhukari had turned into, Atmaveda took Gokarna's advice and went away to seek his peace in the forest.

One night, soon after, Dhundhukari came home, dead drunk, and demanded the keys to the safe box from Dhundhuli. When she refused to give them to him, he began to beat and kick her savagely.

After he had taken all the gold he wanted, he staggered away back to the five whores he was keeping. Later that night, Dhundhuli jumped into the well and drowned herself.

The next day Dhundhukari moved into his father's house with his five whores. Gokarna left quietly on a pilgrimage. Dhundhukari lived steeped in every sin known to man, and quickly ran through all his father's money.

The women began to complain; they denied him their favours. One night, they had a flaming fight with him and said they would leave in a week if he did not provide properly for them.

Dhundhukari set out on a weeklong spree of robbery and murder. On the eighth day he returned to his father's house, drunk, but laden with gold, jewels, priceless ornaments, and the costliest silks for his whores.

The women lavished their skills on him that night, until he fell into a pleasant stupor. The women's eyes glittered with greed as they inspected the spoils he had brought home. They spoke in low voices among themselves.

One said, "He couldn't have stolen so much gold and ornaments without killing someone."

Another put in, "It's enough to last us a lifetime."

A third said, "He is sure to have left all the clues they need to catch him."

The fourth opined, "The king's agents must already be on his trail. They will catch him, and execute him."

The fifth breathed, "And the king will take all this gold, these jewels and silks."

"Perhaps we can hide some of it."

"Why give up any of it?" said the third, shrewdest, most cold-hearted woman.

"But how can we keep it?"

"Simple. We kill this fool tonight in his sleep, and take this treasure away with us. No one knows us in this town; no one knows we are here."

They bound Dhundhukari hand and foot, and strangled him with a rope, which two held on one side and three on the other. They pulled on the rope until his tongue lolled purple from his mouth; but so fierce was his spirit that he did not die.

In fury, one woman ran into the kitchen and fetched some live coals from the fire. She threw these over his face, and in agony and terror he gave up his ghost. The whores buried Dhundhukari in a pit they dug in his parents' yard, and covered his grave with flowerpots.

The five women set up a whorehouse on their own, entertained many customers, and continued their dissolute lives. But Dhundhukari turned into a terrible goblin-like spirit.

The cold fires of his sins burned him remorselessly. He was ravaged by hunger and thirst, and blew as a fell wind in the ten directions, never resting, always trying to escape from himself, which he could never do.

The fires tormented him and he howled at the spirit sky, but no one seemed to hear him.

Meanwhile, in the corporeal world, Gokarna on his pilgrimage had a powerful intuition that his brother was dead, and had turned into a monstrous spirit, a pisacha. Gokarna came to blessed Gaya, and performed a sraddha for the peace of his brother's soul.

He knew Dhundhukari had no peace, but was in hell. Gokarna set out on another pilgrimage, and at every tirtha he came to, he performed a sraddha for his brother's spirit. At every holy ford he visited, the Sage Gokarna prayed for his dead brother; but to no avail.

Finally, Gokarna returned to the town of his birth, and his parents' house. He entered the gate quietly, and lay down in the yard to sleep.

At the witching hour, past midnight, Dhundhukari woke his brother, by manifesting himself to him in one horrible form after another, and screeching and roaring at him.

He appeared as an immense ram, an elephant, a buffalo, and even as the Devas Indra and Agni. Then he appeared in a human form.

He raged at his brother from every side, appearing in one form, then vanishing and appearing again in another place in a different shape, always howling in the most terrifying manner, and dribbling what seemed to be blood.

Watching this evil performance calmly, Gokarna asked, "Who are you, Spirit? Ah, what sins make you suffer like this? Are you a bhuta, a preta or a pisacha?"

His brother's spirit could not reply coherently, but only growl and spit. Gokarna took a bottle of holy water from the tirthas, and sprinkled some on the demon spirit. The spirit screamed in pain, but the water seemed to heal him a little, so at least now he could speak.

"I am your brother Dhundhukari, don't you recognise me?" wailed the ghost. "Ah, how I sinned that I am reduced to this. Yes, I was born a brahmana, but I wasted my life in a long frenzy of sin.

And now I am paying for it, oh, how I am paying for it. I live on air now, and the air I breathe burns me. Oh, save me, Gokarna my brother, only you can save my wretched soul!"

The spirit wept pitiably, and Gokarna knew how much he was suffering.

Gokarna said kindly, "I have prayed for you at every tirtha, and offered a ball of rice even at Gaya. If a sraddha performed at Gaya did not help you, Spirit, I fear you are beyond help."

The ghost said, "Innocent one, you don't know a hundredth part of the sins I committed. Not a hundred sraddhas at Gaya can release me from my torment! Think of another remedy."

Gokarna said again, "Why, if a hundred sraddhas at Gaya cannot save you, you are beyond salvation." The spirit gave a dreadful moan.

Moved to pity, Gokarna said at once, "But don't despair. For every problem, even the apparently insoluble one, there is a solution. I swear I will find a solution for you. But go back to your world of spirits now. Leave me in some peace, so I can think calmly of a way to free you from your torture."

The ghost retired to its darkness beyond the night. Gokarna sat sleepless, trying to think of a way to save his brother's spirit. He sat plunged in intense dhyana.

At dawn the people of the town emerged from their homes and, seeing Gokarna, came to greet him. He sat unmoving in meditation. The sun rose and began to climb into the sky. But Gokarna's dhyana arrested Surya Deva's ascent!

"Witness of the world!" said Gokarna. "I prostrate myself before you. I beg you, help me find a way to redeem my brother from his suffering."

The Sun God spoke to Gokarna, "In this kali yuga, there is only one solution for your brother's plight. He must listen to Suka's Purana, the Bhagavatam, for a week."

All the people who had come to see Gokarna murmured their agreement. They, too, were agog to hear the secret Purana. The lame came to listen to Gokarna reading the Bhagavatam, the blind and the crippled were there.

The old came in droves, as did those not right in the head. All of them came to have their sins of past lives quelled by the touch of the Lord Vishnu, who was himself the recondite Purana.

The place where Gokarna meant to recite the Bhagavatam swarmed with people from all over the world. Many had comes from distant countries, and to the Devas watching from the sky, amazed, it seemed that place was a sea of men and women.

Dhundhukari was there, as well, but he could find nowhere to sit. It was hard for him to remain anywhere for long, since the wind would blow his airy form away. Then he saw a tall bamboo, with seven joints and seven stems. He seeped into it through a hole at its base, and filled the hollow stalks.

In a ringing voice, the usually soft-spoken Gokarna began to sing the Bhagavatam. He began at the first skandha, and even the wind in the trees paused to listen to him. Rivers seemed to stand still, and the sky and the Gods in it craned down to hear the mellifluous scripture.

When dusk fell, and Gokarna had finished for the day, a sharp report echoed in the open glade: one of the seven knotty joints of the thick bamboo in which Dhundhukari was, had split.

The next day, at dawn, Gokarna resumed his inspired recitation. At the twilight hour, when he finished, again there was the sound of the splitting of the second joint of the great bamboo.

On the third evening, the third knot cracked, and so on, one joint for every day. On the seventh and final day, as the sun sank behind the western mountain, Gokarna completed the twelfth and final skandha of the sacred Purana. With the loudest crack of all, like a clap of thunder, the last joint in the bamboo split wide.

All the gathering of thousands turned towards the bamboo swaying gently in the breeze. By the last light of the day, they saw a beautiful figure issue from the riven bamboo.

Dhundhukari had cast off his fiendish form. His skin was like a blue cloud in autumn; his limbs were lustrous, and decked with a profusion of sweet tulasi garlands. He wore golden robes, a crown studded with unearthly jewels on his head, and solitaires that glittered like stars in his ears and on his fingers.

The splendid figure prostrated itself before Gokarna. "My brother, I am free of all my sins!" said Dhundhukari in a clear, fine voice. "Ah, there is no yagna to remotely rival listening to the holy Bhagavatam.

As you sang the Purana, I felt my legion sins tremble and cry in fell voices to one another. 'O now we shall be burnt to ashes!' The knots with which my most terrible sins bound my heart were cut, and they burst apart like the joints of the bamboo, setting me free.

And the sins themselves, on fire, were blown away, wailing into the abyss. Oh my sweet, sweet brother, you have set me free! I bless you, great Gokarna, I bless you a thousand times. And I say this Purana, the Bhagavatam, is no less than the Lord Vishnu himself."

As Dhundhukari spoke, a brilliant vimana flew down from the sky, soft as the petals of a rose. In it were many eternal dwellers in Vishnu's realm, Vaikuntha. Dhundhukari embraced his brother Gokarna, and climbed into the ship of the sky.

Now Gokarna was disturbed in his mind. He asked the great Vishnubhaktas in that vimana, "Everyone gathered here listened equally to the Bhagavatam. Then why is only Dhundhukari being given redemption?"

The Vishnubhaktas replied, "Everyone here listened to the Purana, but no one else heard it as fervidly as Dhundhukari. He ate nothing for these seven days, and he listened knowing that his life, his salvation depended on it.

There was a deep difference in the way in which Dhundhukari heard the Bhagavatam, and the others did. But surely, if the others listen to the

Purana once more, they too will find moksha. Why, the Lord Hari will come himself to take them to Goloka."

The vimana flashed away into heaven beyond the stars, like a thought, leaving a golden trail in the sky, which dissolved in a few moments and vanished above the perfect silence that had fallen on the gathering of men on the earth below.

Later, the people came to Gokarna and begged him that he must repeat the Bhagavatam, for they too wanted to be set free from the bonds of their bodies.

So, the very next month, in Sravana, Gokarna sang the Purana again for a week; but now he began at dusk and continued until the sun rose; he rested through the day, and resumed with sunset.

At the end of the week, they heard a great sea conch boom as if from the rising sun. A blinding light filled all the four quarters, engulfed earth and sky, and Vishnu appeared before Gokarna and his people.

A flotilla of vimanas surrounded the Blue God, and rapturous cries of Jaya! erupted in the air. Vishnu came up to Gokarna and embraced him, and at once that Muni had a form exactly like the Lord's!

The Lord Narayana cast his eyes over the rest of the gathering, and like Dhundhukari, all of them were blue-skinned as clouds, splendid, and wore bright pitambara robes, and unworldly crowns on their heads, signifying their lordship over other worlds.

Why, the chandalas and the dogs of that town were taken to Vaikuntha in the gleaming vimanas, to Vaikuntha where the greatest Sages go after a lifetime of tapasya. Just like the people of Ayodhya rose with Rama at the Sarayu, and had moksha, so too did the people of Gokarna ascend into eternal bliss with Blue Krishna.

It was because they listened twice to Gokarna's narration of the holy Bhagavatam that they attained a realm where the Sun, the Moon and the Siddhas cannot come. Why, the great Muni Shandilya, who is always absorbed in the Parabrahman, reads the Bhagavata Purana regularly,' says the Suta in the Naimisa vana.

'There is nothing in any of the three worlds as pure as the Bhagavata Purana. He who listens to it with care, or who narrates it with faith becomes a master of the universe, because he becomes Hari Narayana, the Sleeper on the waters of infinity.'

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Skandha 2

VYASA AND NARADA

THIS BHAGAVATA PURANA IS THE FRUIT OF THE KALPAVRIKSHA OF THE Vedas. Suka Muni, named for the parrot, dropped this fruit down among us from his mouth: this fruit full of amrita, this fruit he first had from his father, the incomparable Vyasa.

In the heart of the Naimisa vana, Saunaka asks the Suta Romaharshana's son, Ugrasravas, 'Muni, how did you first learn the holy Bhagavata Purana?'

Ugrasravas replies, 'Brahmanas, when king Parikshit sat on the banks of the Ganga, waiting for death, Vyasa Dwaipayana's son Suka sang the Bhagavatam to him. They allowed me to listen to the sacred narration, and every syllable of it has remained in my heart, as if by magic.

The kali yuga began when Krishna left this world and returned on high. The earth was plunged in a sinful night. This Bhagavatam is a sun risen in the evil age to show mortal men the way to salvation.'

Saunaka said, 'Tell us the secret Purana. How did Vyasa Muni first compose or receive it?'

Ugrasravas begins, 'Vyasa was born in the dwapara yuga from Satyavati the fishergirl, who was really an apsara's daughter, and the Maharishi Parasara.

One day Vyasa sat alone in a lonely place and sipped holy water from the Saraswati, from the palm of his hand. The dark Sage saw through time; he saw how the age had imperceptibly begun to darken.

He saw how kaala, time, swept along, and men began to dwindle in stature, in purity, in intellect, and even longevity. Great many things Vyasa saw with his awesome power of vision. A desire stirred in his heart—to create something that would help all men, all classes of men.

Vyasa Muni divided the single, original Veda into four: the Rik, the Yajus, the Saman and the Atharva. There would be a "fifth" Veda, too—the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

Of the first four Vedas, Vyasa's disciple Paila received the Rik Veda from his master. The Rishi Jaimini had the Saman from his Guru, and was a master at singing its hymns.

Vaisampayana alone was taught the Yajus by Vyasa; and Varuna's son, the terrible Sumantu, received the esoteric Atharva Veda from Dwaipayana Vyasa.

These disciples of Vyasa then further divided the Vedas they had from their master, and taught portions of each Veda to their disciples. So, in time, even men of lesser intellect could study and transmit limited portions of the original Veda.

But even these divided Vedangas should not be heard by women, by sudras, and by impure members of the higher castes. So, out of compassion for these excluded others, Vyasa composed the Mahabharata.

Of course, disciples of the ancient Muni Valmiki transmitted the sacred Ramayana down the ages, for all to hear and to read, and to be sanctified by.

After he had composed the Mahabharata, which the Lord Ganapathy transcribed with a tusk that he broke from his face, Vyasa sat plunged in thought, alone in his asrama. Despite his immense achievement, he felt less than satisfied, and he was surprised by his mood.

Suddenly he heard the enraptured plucking of a vina. The minstrel was approaching him through the trees, and Vyasa had a good idea who this was. As he rose to welcome his illustrious visitor, Brahma's son Narada stepped, blithely as ever, into the clearing in which Vyasa's hermitage stood.

When the visitor had been decorously welcomed, and both Sages sat together on darbhasanas, sharing a fine silence, Narada said with a slight smile, "Muni, you have composed an immortal epic. You have divided the Veda so it will survive in the darkest times, when men have become midgets in body and spirit.

"Still, you are dissatisfied. You still feel you have not expressed yourself or found what you were after. Vyasa, this is strange."

Vyasa sighed, he said, "What you say is true, Muni, and I wish you would tell me why it is so."

Narada strummed a few notes on his vina, and replied, "Your work so far describes ancient rituals, and then human life, its strife and its ends. But you have not yet described the Lord himself.

Muni, ordinary men will be enthralled by your work, especially by the Mahabharata. But what about the other Rishis of earth and heaven?

Vyasa, can the swans who swim upon the waters of the Manasasarovara be delighted by the lakes of Bharatavarsha? You, yourself, Muni, will not find peace until you turn your great gift to describing the Lord himself. Only that can set you free.

Do you know how I became a bhakta of the Lord Vishnu?"

NARADA'S PAST LIFE

"ONCE, IN ANOTHER KALPA, I WAS BORN AS THE CHILD OF A MAIDSERVANT who waited upon the Rishis in an asrama. Even as a child I was fascinated by the stories with which they regaled one another, daily.

I would sit near them and listen avidly to the life and deeds of Krishna, which they told with such delight. There began my journey that purified me, the endless journey, Muni."

Vyasa asked, "Tell me more about that life of yours, Narada."

"The Munis who stoked the love of Krishna in my heart grew old and went away. My mother remained in their asrama, and being a simple woman, she bound me to her with thongs of emotion.

I was her only child, and lived with her, thinking there was no alternative for me; but my spirit was full of wild yearnings for the Lord. One night, my mother went out to milk a cow and a serpent that Yama sent stung her.

After I cremated her, and floated her ashes down the river flowing nearby, I set out northwards, in the direction of the Gods.

On my wanderings across the Holy Land, I saw many great kingdoms and cities, humble, lovely villages, lush jungles, and azure rivers. I saw mountains of different colours, and wonderful wild creatures, elephant and tiger, deer and dark panther.

I hearkened to the songs of all the birds of the wide world, and saw majestic swans gliding upon lakes set like jewels on the face of the earth.

I came to enchanted lakes, where I saw divine gandharva and kinnaras frolic with their exquisite women. I saw Devas fly down to the earth in their mystic vimanas, which are swifter than light.

One day, I was exhausted by my ceaseless wandering, and I arrived on the hem of an ominous forest, full of nala and kusa grasses, and giant bamboo that the wind played like great flutes.

I could sense dark presences in that jungle, and saw jackals and snakes in the long grass. I saw some wild elephants, too, that looked far from friendly. I pressed on through the trees and saw a river, and a lake along its sky-blue course. I bathed in the lotus brimming lake, and felt refreshed.

On the banks of the lake, a pippala tree grew, and I sat down under it and shut my eyes. I began to meditate as the Rishis of the asrama had taught me. I felt my eyes fill with unaccountable tears, and my body, with an indescribable joy.

Slowly, Hari manifested himself in my heart. My hair stood on end, Vyasa, a flashflood of ecstasy swept me out of myself. I don't know how long the communion lasted, it may have been a moment or a year, but as suddenly as he had come to me my ineffable Lord was gone.

I opened my eyes and jumped up, in some despair. Ah, I was full of anxiety, like a mad man. I gnashed my teeth, sobbed, and called out to Him.

Then, a great voice spoke to me from everywhere. 'You will find me again, when all the desires in your heart have been quelled. And when you have cast off this gross body of yours, you will be my friend and my emissary. Remember, I am with you always.'

I lay on my face in worship of the God of Gods. He was gone again. I rose, somewhat reassured. I could not wait to be with Him again; I could not wait to die. But what would I do until death took me to my Hari?

I decided I would wander the earth again, now singing the praises of the Lord, my God. I found all my old bashfulness had left me, and discovered that I had a singing voice. So I set off, sustaining myself by begging alms, and spreading the name and the deeds of Krishna everywhere.

One day, in the fullness of time, when I had been purified by the life I led, death fell on me like a bolt of lightning does on the crystal Mount Sudaman. My human body fell away from me, and I was free!

I had another body now, an ethereal, luminous form. I entered through his breath into the Lord Brahma. Brahma entered into the Lord Vishnu, who, at the end of a kalpa of yugas, had withdrawn the current of the universe back into himself, and now lay asleep on his Serpent bed, on the ocean of eternity.

Both slept; all creation slumbered.

A thousand yugas passed, and Brahma awoke again in the golden lotus that had sprouted from Blue Narayana's navel. He began creation once more; and Marichi and I, and the other original Rishis were born from Brahma's breath.

I ranged the three worlds freely, by Vishnu's grace, a celibate, playing on my vina, singing kirtanas of the Lord. Whenever I sing of his great exploits, he manifests himself in my heart.

There is no joy, or peace, like singing about the Lord himself. Good Vyasa, compose the lives and the deeds of Narayana, and calm will come to your spirit," said Narada to Dwaipayana, the son of Parasara and the fishergirl.

Then, the itinerant said, "I must leave you now, my friend, for there is God's work to be done elsewhere!"

And getting up, plucking again at the golden strings of his vina, breaking spontaneously into a vibrant song, Narada departed.'

Suta pauses, and Saunaka asks eagerly, 'What happened next? What did Vyasa Muni do?'

Suta resumes, 'On the western bank of the Saraswati, which is sacred to the Lord Brahma, is a sylvan asrama called Samyaprasa. Here, Vyasa, the black, sat in padmasana, sipped holy water from the palm of his hand, and shut his eyes in dhyana, thinking deeply of Vishnu.

He saw the Lord, Being of beings, Cause of causes, Primeval. He also saw Narayana's Mayashakti, the great Goddess Illusion, who deludes all the created. He saw the numberless souls she spun on her subtle wheel, binding them, who are pristine and transcendent, into time.

He saw Krishna's infinite lila: his tender, terrible play across the ages.

Vyasa saw that devotion to Vishnu was the only way to free himself from the ubiquitous bonds of maya. In devotion, profound bhakti, Dwaipayana, the river-born Sage, composed the Bhagavata Purana, the sattva Samhita. Once the composition was over, the Muni taught the secret Purana to his brilliant son, Suka the renouncer.'

Saunaka interjects, 'But Suka was always detached from samsara, no bonds of maya ever held him. Why did such a one even want to acquire the lengthy Bhagavatam?'

Suta laughs, 'Even those who are free, jivanmuktas, liberated souls, delight in the legends of Vishnu. Not that they need to hear or sing the Purana to be free, only that it brings them rare rapture of the spirit, and they indulge themselves.'

THE STORY OF PARIKSHIT

UGRASRAVAS SAYS, 'NOW LISTEN TO THE STORY OF PARIKSHIT. THE Great War on the cusp of the ages was over. Ten million kshatriyas had perished, and the power of the race of kings was broken forever.

The Pandavas have won the war, and Bheema kills his evil cousin Duryodhana by striking him in the groin with his mace, shattering his manhood. But Drona's son Aswatthama wreaks terrible revenge on the Pandavas when he beheads all their sons, in the dead of night, as they lay asleep in their tents after the war is over.

He also looses the Brahmasirsa, final astra, crying, "Let there be no more Pandavas in the world!"

But Krishna saves the dead Abhimanyu's son, who is still a foetus in his mother Uttara's womb. As the weapon blazes at the child in his mother's body, the unborn Parikshit sees a splendid Being, small as a man's thumb, wearing a crown with glittering jewels.

The uncanny one has four long arms; he has the complexion of the night lotus, eyes like blood, wears brilliant golden earrings, and he dances in Parikshit's mother's womb, waving his mace.

With this mace, the thumb-sized one extinguished the infernal flames of the Brahmasirsa, until the weapon subsides, then vanishes; and Parikshit is saved from Aswatthama's vengeance against the Pandavas for killing his father Drona.

The small saviour vanishes, and on an auspicious day when all the planets are in harmonious aspects, Parikshit, the 'tested one', who had faced death in his mother's womb, was born.'

A SUDRA, A BULL AND A COW

'THIRTY-THREE YEARS AFTER THE MAHABHARATA YUDDHA, KRISHNA leaves the world. Soon the Pandavas, Yudhishtira and his brothers, and their queen Draupadi also ascend into heaven.

Of the older Kuru generation, only Acharya Kripa remains alive. Though he fought the Great War on Duryodhana's side, he now becomes Parikshit's Guru, and is his mentor when the young prince becomes king in Hastinapura at a tender age.

Parikshit is lord of the earth. He marries Virata's dead son Uttara's daughter, the lovely Iravati. He conquers the world again, and performs three Aswamedha yagnas on the banks of the Ganga, with Kripa as his priest.

Once, when Parikshit was abroad on his conquests, he saw the Demon Kali* on the road to Dwaraka, belabouring and kicking a bull and a cow. Kali was a sudra, yet he wore a kshatriya's garments and carried a king's insignia. The powerful Parikshit captured Kali.'

'Why didn't Parikshit kill the Demon?' asks Saunaka.

'Parikshit saw Kali with a staff in his hand, beating the cow and the bull until they bled. The king saw the one-legged bull urinating in fear, and the cow giving up her sweet milk to the vicious sudra.'

'A one-legged bull?'

'He was Dharma Deva, the God of truth, who hobbles on just one leg in the age of evil. And the cow was Bhumi Devi, Mother Earth.

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*Not to be confused with the Goddess Kaali

Parikshit, king of the world, said in a voice like the rumbling of thunderheads, "Who are you that belabour the weak, whom I protect? Like an actor, you wear the ornaments and clothes of a kshatriya, but by what you do you are a sudra. You deserve to die."

Turning to the bull, Parikshit asked, "And who are you, O one-legged? Are you a God, why do you weep? Don't be afraid of the sudra anymore, I will protect you from him. I am the king of this earth, and it is my dharma to protect the oppressed.

Tell me who cut away your three legs, because I will avenge you, O Bull, for what has been done to you is a crime against the fair name of the sons of Pandu. I will pull out the arms of whoever crippled you. I am a kshatriya; in me is vested the sacred right to judge and to punish."

Dharma, the Bull, said, "Ah, you are a worthy descendant of the sons of Pandu! But I am puzzled, O Parikshit. I cannot decide who is the true aggressor.

Some say it is the Individual Soul who dispenses pleasure and pain; others, astrologists, say that Fate and the Planets rule our lives, and fetch us joy and misery; still others have it that Nature, Prakriti, causes this world and all that is in it; while, some hold that God the Supreme Soul is the origin of all things. For myself, I am confused; you consider yourself whom you choose to blame." Thus, cryptically, the Bull answered.

Parikshit said, "Wise One, you expound the sanatana dharma so subtly! You know that to report a crime fetches the same karma as committing it. I think I know who you really are.

In the krita yuga, austerity, purity, compassion and honesty were the four legs of dharma. In this kali, three of them have been broken by pride, by lasciviousness and by inebriation.

O Dharma Deva, surely you are the God of righteousness; in these evil times honesty is the only leg upon which you stand. And this monster, Kali, wants to break that leg as well!"

He now turned to the cow, and said, "Devi, I know who you are, O Mother of us all. I know you cry because Blue Krishna's feet no longer walk upon you. You cry because this is the age of the Sudra and the vilest, meanest men will become kings and enjoy our mother."

Parikshit stroked their sides compassionately, and they were consoled. Now, the kshatriya, emperor of the world, drew his sword and rounded on Kali. Kali trembled; he tore off the gold and royal silks he was wearing and fell at Parikshit's feet.

"Mercy!" cried the Demon, "Mercy, great Kshatriya!"

The Kuru king said, "Since you seek mercy, no harm will come to you from us, who are the keepers of Arjuna's glory. But you are cruel and evil, so be certain you do not dwell in any part of my kingdom.

This is Brahmavarta, the Holy Land, where the Lord Hari is adored with sacrifices. You will corrupt this land with your presence; you will spread vileness and hatred throughout my country. Be gone!"

Kali asked abjectly, "Tell me, then, where I can live."

Parikshit replied, "Live in gambling dens, in whorehouses, in places where men come to drink wine, and in the houses of slaughter."

Kali bent his head again, asking for other places where he could dwell.

Parikshit said, "Live in gold, Kali, for gold ruins men. Live in lies, in pride, in passion, in ignorance, and live in enmity."

By banishing the Demon to the places of iniquity, the king made the Bull, Dharma, whole again. Righteousness was four-legged once more, and strong; and the Earth was prosperous again, and glad.

It was after this that Parikshit returned to Hastinapura and began ruling. As long as Abhimanyu's son ruled the world, Kali could hardly increase his influence on earth, as he had come to do. Why, even in the places assigned to him by the great kshatriya, he hardly prevailed.

Parikshit enjoyed the kali yuga, for he knew that this is the age in which even a good thought bears fruit, while evil must happen in deed before it fructifies. Finally, he heard the holy Bhagavata Purana on the banks of the Ganga from Suka Muni, and there he gave up his mortal life.'

THE CURSE

SAUNAKA SAYS, 'KRISHNA, THE LORD VISHNU, IS CALLED BHAGAVAT, and his Purana is the Bhagavatam. Your Purana is sweetness itself, masterly Suta. Tell us more.'

Ugrasravas resumes, 'Once, Parikshit went hunting in the jungle. He saw a fine stag, and followed it a long time. But the creature was elusive, or magical, and led the king on a long chase.

Hungry and thirsty, and exhausted, Parikshit came to an asrama nestled into the very heart of the forest. Entering the hermitage, he saw a lean and radiant Rishi sitting there, with his eyes shut, rapt in dhyana.

The king hardly realised this, but that Sage had attained the fourth condition, beyond waking, dreams, and dreamless sleep, what the mystics call turiya – he was entirely absorbed in the Brahman, the Holy Spirit, the Formless Godhead.

The hermit wore the hide of a ruru deer, and his head and face were covered in jata, matted dreadlocks. He did not open his eyes, or stir to greet the king, or offer him a darbhasana to sit in.

The tired and thirsty Parikshit was furious. He saw a dead snake lying on the ground. He scooped it up on the end of his bow, draped it round the meditating ascetic's neck, and stalked out of the asrama. Parikshit returned to Hastinapura.

Later, the Muni's son, Sringi, returned to the hermitage and found his father still plunged in dhyana, but with a dead snake around his neck. Some young brahmanas who had seen what Parikshit did told Sringi what had happened. Sringi dared not disturb his father's meditation, but he cursed Parikshit from afar.

Sipping holy water in achamana, his eyes crimson, he raged, "Wretched Kshatriya, dare you defile my father like this? Seven days from today, you shall die of snakebite, for Takshaka, the serpent king, shall sting you!"

Then he fell at his unmoving father's feet and sobbed loudly. The father opened his eyes, saw the dead snake around his neck, and, quite unconcerned, threw it away. He stroked his son's head, and asked, "Why are you crying, my child?"

Still sobbing, still furious, Sringi told him how Parikshit had draped the snake around his neck, and how he, Sringi, had cursed Parikshit with death.

"Oh, what have you done!" cried the father. "Such a dire punishment for so small a fault. And whom have you punished? The protector of the earth! After Krishna left the world, it is great Parikshit who keeps evil at bay from all our lives. Ignorant child, who will save the earth from the Demon Kali, when Parikshit is dead? "

The old one looked into his heart, and saw exactly what had transpired.

He said, "The poor king was thirsty and hungry; he was so tired he could barely walk. It was only natural for him to become annoyed when I offered him no greeting or hospitality, when I did not even offer him water to drink.

"O Lord Krishna, I beg you, take all my punya from me, but forgive my callow boy the dreadful sin of excess he has committed today! Foolish child, the true bhaktas of the Lord never retaliate in kind, even if they are cheated, abused, humiliated or even struck with weapons.

"Ah, what have you done, my son? You have ushered in the ruin of the world!"

Far away, in Hastinapura, after he had eaten and drunk, Parikshit was also full of remorse. With tears springing in his eyes, he said to himself, "Oh, what have I done today? In my arrogance I have sinned unforgivably against a great and powerful brahmana.

"Surely some calamity will befall me. I only pray it does not affect my children but falls squarely on me. Let me suffer as I deserve, so I will never sin again like this.

Let my kingdom and all my glory be consumed! Let my army desert me and all the gold in my coffers turn to base iron! A wretch like me, who cannot contain the power he wields, does not deserve to be a king."

As he murmured all this to himself, a messenger ran panting to him, and cried, "My lord! The young Muni Sringi has cursed you to die of snakebite in seven days. He has said the serpent king Takshasa will bite you."

Parikshit said quite calmly, "It is only what I deserve. Why, it is a blessing for me that my sin shall be expiated so quickly."

Parikshit decided he would renounce his kingdom, and go and sit on the banks of the Ganga, to worship Krishna before he died. He decided he would not eat a morsel before Yama came for him.

Indeed, what man about to die will not go to Ganga, the mother, whose waters will carry his soul straight to the feet of the Blue God? The king renounced everything he had, and his family too, and sought the banks of the holy river.'

ON THE BANKS OF THE GANGA

'AS HE SAT THERE, TRYING TO MEDITATE, BUT HIS MIND RESTLESS, HE saw the greatest Rishis walking towards him.

Atri, Vasistha, Chyvana, Shardavana, Arishtanemi, Bhrigu, Angirasas, Parasara, Viswamitra, Parasurama, Utathya, Indrapramada, and Idhmavaha, all came and sat around him.

Later, Medhatithi, Devala, Arishtisena, Bharadvaja, Gautama, Pippalada, Maitreya, Aurva, Kavasha, Agastya, Dwaipayana Vyasa and the eternal wanderer, Narada, also joined the exalted congregation.

Parikshit welcomed them, prostrating himself before each one. He said to them, "Surely, Holy Ones, my time to die has come, and Krishna himself has visited me as Sringi's curse. I have put all my attachments behind me, all I want now is to hear songs of my Lord.

Then let Takshaka sting me to his heart's content and I will go willingly from this world. All I pray is that, however I am born in my next life, let me be born as a Krishna bhakta, and let me live near those who seek his refuge at all times. Brahmanas, I seek your blessing."

He bowed to them again, with folded hands, and sat down on the southern bank of the Ganga, on a bed of darbha grass, laid east to west, and facing north himself, the direction of the Gods.

When Parikshit sat down to fast unto death, the Devas rained down flowers of light from their lofty zones, and the sky echoed with batteries of drums.

Now, the great Rishis said to the kshatriya, "We will stay with you, O Rajarishi, until you cast away your mortal coil."

Parikshit said, "Ah, my lords, I am thrice blessed that you have come to me at this time even like the Vedas come, embodied, to Satyaloka. But tell me, Holy Ones, what I should do to have all my sins taken from me before my time comes to die."

Just then, they saw a strange and motley crowd of women and children approaching them along the river's bank. It was a happy crowd, led by a youth of some sixteen summers, clad only in the wind.

His eyes were luminous and fine, and set wide in his handsome face. His nose was prominent. Though at first sight he seemed just sixteen, there was something utterly ancient about him as well, as if the spirit of all things dwelt in his spare, radiant frame, the Spirit beyond time.

His hair was a mass of curls, hanging to his shoulders; his arms hung down to his knees: ah, he was altogether beautiful, irresistible, as he chatted brightly with the women and children, all entranced by him.

He was dark, even like Krishna, and his smile was brilliant.

The great Sages around Parikshit all rose to welcome the immortal youth, who was Vyasa's enlightened son Suka. Suka waved away his following of women and children, kissing many of them fondly, stroking the cheeks of others, before they went off along the river's edge, often turning back to wave to him.

Parikshit rose and prostrated himself at Suka's feet. Vyasa's son seemed like a full moon surrounded by the stars in a clear night sky.

The king cried, "Krishna is pleased with me that you have come here at this hour! Else, how can anyone see you thus in a human form, O Suka, who were absorbed bodily into the Brahman?"

They made the luminous youth sit in a darbhasana, facing the rest of them, even as a king might face his ministers in his court, or a Guru his sishyas.

Parikshit now asked Suka, "Lord, tell me what I can do to purify myself in seven days, before I die."

Suka smiled, and said, "Nothing brings peace, nothing purifies the body and the soul, as death approaches like the *Bhagavata Purana* of the Lord. I learnt this secret lore from my father at the end of the dwapara yuga.

You, O King, are not only our Lord Krishna's bhakta, you are related to him!

At least you have seven days to seek moksha; the ancient king Khatvanga had just a muhurta, a brief hour. Yet by practising the dharana, and seeking refuge in Vishnu, he found nirvana."

Parikshit asked, "Muni, how is the dharana practised?"

Suka said, "Near the end of his life, when a man is no more afraid of death, he should sever his attachments – for pleasure, his wife and children, his body, his home, everything.

He should walk away from all these, bathe in a holy river, and sit alone in a secluded place. He should control his breathing, and repeat the great and sacred syllable, AUM, the seed of Brahman: first aloud, and then in his mind.

He should meditate on the form of the Blue God, Krishna."

"On which form of Krishna should he meditate?"

VIRATA PURUSHA

"HE CAN MEDITATE ON THE VIRATA PURUSHA, THE GREATEST, COSMIC Form of the Lord. The universe is the body of the Cosmic Person.

They say patala is the soles of his feet, rasatala is his heels and his toes, mahatala is his ankles, talatala is his shanks, sutala his two knees, and vitala and atala are his thighs.

This earth, bhumi, is his hips, and the sky is his navel. The galaxies are splayed across his chest, maharloka is his neck, janaloka his mouth, tapoloka his brow, and satyaloka is the head of this Person of a thousand heads.

Indra and the other Devas are his arms, the cardinal points are his ears; the Aswin twins, Nasatya and Dasra, are his nostrils, and Agni his tongue.

The Sun and the Moon are his eyes, and day and night his eyelids; Brahmaloka is his eyelids, water is his palate. The Vedas are the brahmarandhra on the skull of this Being; Yama is his teeth, his fangs, Maya, illusion, which drives men mad, is his laugh; and endless creation springs from his sidelong glance.

Modesty is his upper lip, greed is his lower. Dharma is his breast, while adharma is his back.

Prajapati, the Creator is the Vairajah Purusha's penis, while Mitra Deva and Varuna Deva are his testicles. The oceans of the cosmos are his belly, and the mountains his skeleton. The rivers are his arteries; the trees are his hair. Vayu is his breath, time is his movement, and sattva, rajas and tamas are his gestures.

Twilight is the garment he wears; everything unmanifest – avyakta – is his heart, and the Moon is his mind. The human race is where he dwells; the gandharvas, vidyadharas, charanas and apsaras are his svaras, his octave; and the legions of night, the Asura armies, are his strength.

The brahmana is the Vairajah Purusha's mouth, the kshatriya is his arms, the vaisya his thighs, and the dark sudra is his feet.

As death draws near, O King, one should meditate upon this Universal Being, the Visawa Virata Swarupa of the Lord; make him one's sanctuary, who is the final reality, and the sea of bliss.

Krishna is the saviour: whose eyes are like lotus petals; who has the colour of the blue raincloud; who wears pitambara robes which are the colour of the filaments of the kadamba flower; who bears the srivatsa of the Devi Lakshmi upon his breast, and the kaustubha next to it upon a golden chain like a streak of lightning.

The man who abandons himself to Krishna is absorbed in the Atman, and then the Brahman, from where there is no return."

THE WAY OF DHYANA

"TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE INNER PATH TO FREEDOM, THE PATH OF dhyana," Parikshit said.

"The Rishi who has severed all his attachments comes naturally to path that leads to the liberation of his soul.

He sits reposed in a sequestered place, and awakens his kundalini shakti, the serpent power that slumbers at the base of his spine. He raises it through the six chakras along his spine.

From the anal muladhara chakra he lifts it to the umbilical manipura chakra in his navel, and then on to the anahata chakra in his heart. From there, by the path of udana, subtle breath, he draws the kundalini up towards his head – first, through the purifying visuddha chakra just below his throat, to the chakra on his tongue, then to the ajna chakra between his eyebrows, and up finally to the brahmarandhra, the thousand-petalled lotus in his brain.

Then he is one with the Brahman.

Now his lustrous spirit body is fully awakened, the linga sarira, and he has mastery over the eight superhuman faculties. He can travel anywhere in the universe in this sukshma rupa, this subtle, incorporeal body.

At the second chakra, he passes through the sky, and arrives in the realm of divine fire, Vaisvanara. He is burnt pure by the fire.

He travels on, by the tubular susumna nadi, and comes to the saisumara chakra, the realm of the dolphin, the place where his umbilicus of a thousand lives is cut from him. This is the navel of the universe, the heart of all the galaxies, the realm of Vishnu.

His body atomised, shining, he flies on to a world where beings who know the Brahman live lives that last a kalpa. He, too, dwells there for a kalpa.

When the kalpa ends, he sees the universe being consumed in the cosmic apocalypse spewing from the thousand mouths of Anantasesha. Then he journeys to the higher world of Paramesthin, where the greatest siddhas remain in great vimanas for two parardhas, which are 100,000,000,000,000,000 years each.

There is neither old age nor death in these realms, nor any sorrow except compassion for those who turn on the lower wheels of lives and deaths, and endless misery, those who do not yet tread the path of bhakti.

Now the yogin unites his spirit body, his linga sarira, with the panchabhuta, the cosmic elements – first with prithvi, earth; then with jala, water; then with agni, fire; and with vayu, air; finally, he merges into the fifth element, akasa, the ether.

Travelling to the wellsprings of the senses, as the elements he has become, he transcends the senses – first smell, then taste, then sight, touch, and sound. He unites with the vital breath, with prana.

He comes into the core of ahamkara, the sense of self; he comes to where the elements, the panchabhuta, and the subtle sense organs in the mind, and also the deities that preside over these, are transcended.

He comes past ahamkara, into the principle called Mahat, or vijnana, and then on to Pradhana or Prakriti, which are primal, original.

His every vestige of self falls away from the yogin. He is absorbed into the ancestral Supreme Soul, the unchanging Paramatman, where he finds perfect bliss. He passes beyond his final attachments, to the world, to the universe.

This, O King, is the path to moksha described in the Veda. This is a path described in time out of mind by the Lord Vishnu to Brahma. Contained in the path are the two ways – the instant way to Liberation, and the gradual.

Krishna is both paths. He is the source, the beginning, the middle, and the only end of every branch of every path.

The man who wants the wisdom and power of the Vedas, let him worship Brahma. He who wants power and skill in his body should worship Indra.

Those who want sons and daughters should pray to the Prajapatis, like Daksha and Brahma's other sons. He who wants prosperity should worship the Devi Maya, and the Devi Durga.

He who wants to be brilliant should worship Agni Deva. He who wants wealth should propitiate the eight Vasus, and he who wants strength, the Rudras.

The man who wants to eat the choicest delicacies worships Aditi, and he who wants swarga for himself worships Aditi's sons, the twelve Adityas. He who wants a kingdom prays to the Viswedevas; and he who wants to control his subjects, the Sadhyas.

For a long life, the Aswini twins are worshipped, and Bhumi Devi for strength. A man seeking permanence of position worships the Sky and the Earth, the father and mother of this world; while he who wants to be handsome worships the Gandharvas, of whom Chitraratha is king.

A man wanting to enjoy beautiful women is a supplicant of the apsara Urvashi, and he who wants to be an emperor petitions the Lord Brahma. He who seeks fame or success worships Yagna Deva, who is an amsa of Vishnu; the man who seeks treasures worships Varuna, Lord of the Ocean.

He who wants learning is a Sivabhakta, and for love in marriage he worships the Devi Parvati.

For justice, Vishnu is the God to worship, to have children, the Pitrs, the manes. For protection in danger, the Yakshas are invoked, for more strength, the Maruts. To be a king a man should pray to the Manus, who are the Lords of the manvantaras; he who wants his enemies destroyed worships the Nairritas, who are demons.

For every pleasure and enjoyment, the Lord Soma, the Moon God, is worshipped, whilst he who wants to be rise above every attachment and desire, prays to the Purushottama, the perfect man.

And the man who is truly intelligent, and wants no desires to spring anymore in his heart, who wants moksha, he worships the Vairajah Purusha, the Cosmic Person.

Listening to the legends of the Lord Vishnu, O King, certainly frees a man's mind from his gross attachments, why, in this darkening kali yuga, the very name of Krishna leads one towards illumination," said Suka to the Kuru king,' Suta tells Saunaka's Rishis in the Naimisa vana.

NARADA QUESTIONS BRAHMA

SAUNAKA SAYS, 'SURELY, SUTA, WHEN BOTH SUKA DEVA AND PARIKSHIT were such Krishna bhaktas, there was some talk of the Blue One, some narration of his exploits.

I have heard the wisest men tell, Muni, that ears which have not heard the name of Krishna are like empty holes: of no use to the one who owns them; I have heard that the tongue that doesn't sing of Krishna is evil, like the frog's.

The rising and the setting sun rob men of their lives, except those hours spent speaking of Krishna.

The head that wears a crown is still a burden, until it is bent at the Blue God's feet; the hands adorned with golden rings are like those on a corpse, until they are folded to Hari. The eyes that do not see the images of Vishnu are as blind as the eyelets on the peacock's tail.

The feet that never go on a pilgrimage are like dead plants. The man who does not take the padadhuli from the devotees of the Lord, is like a walking carcass. The heart which is not moved when it hears the names of Hari being chanted, is harder than granite.

Dear Suta, our debt to you is incalculable. Forgive me for interrupting you, and tell us more about what Vyasa's son said to the king on the banks of the Ganga.'

Suta resumes, 'When Parikshit heard what Suka Deva said, he felt a great light dawning in his heart, a light of freedom. He said, "Sinless Muni, tell me again how the Lord created the universe with his maya shakti, the universe that not even Brahma can comprehend.

"Suka, tell me more about immortal Vishnu, whose ways are so utterly mysterious. Tell me about his incarnations, how he assumes the diverse mantle of prakriti."

Suka shut his eyes in prayer. He began, "May Krishna, the Lord of the universe, the Master of all things, the Un-born God, have mercy on me, and bless me! May my father, the immortal Vyasa Muni, from whose lips his disciples drink the honey of knowledge, bless me!

Once, Brahma himself answered your questions, which his son Narada asked him.

Narada sat with the Lotus-born Grandsire of the worlds. It was the very beginning of days, and the wandering Muni asked the Creator, 'Pitama, ancestor of all beings, I beg you tell me how I can know the nature of the Atman.

Tell me what it is that manifests itself as this world. What is its support, from where does it originate, into what is it withdrawn when the world subsides?

You, Father, are master of the past, the present and the future. You know the universe like the palm of your hand. Who is your support? By whose power do you exist?

Are you the final Creator, who weaves the fabric of time, and the ages, as effortlessly as a spider does its web? Or is there another beyond you, upon whom you rest, on whom you depend?'

Brahma replied, 'Gentle child, there is One beyond me, who is my source even as I am the source of all these worlds and creatures. The light I shed on creation is his light, Muni.

Why, the light of the sun, the moon, the fire and all the stars is his reflected glory. All that exists, from the smallest particle to the greatest God, comes from Him.

Narayana, who lies upon eternal waters, is formless. But he has assumed attributes, the three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, which create, sustain and destroy the world of appearances.

The five elements, gyana and karma are founded on the three gunas. These bind the soul in a sheath of ignorance and illusion, a sheath of maya.

When Vishnu, who was One and Formless, wanted to be many and to have forms, the balance of the three gunas was disturbed, and what is called Mahat came to be. In this Mahat, permeated with sattva and rajas, another dimension grew, dominated by tamas.

In that dimension, the gross, physical elements took form, the senses and their objects, and the gods of these. This realm, or Thing, which evolved was called Ahamkara, the sense of self, of I-ness.

Ahamkara modified itself into three – sattvika, rajasika and tamasika.

From tamasa ahamkara, called bhutadi, the source of the elements, akasa, the cosmic ether, evolved. Its essence is shabda, sound, which leads to the knowledge of the seer and the seen.

Transforming, akasa became vayu, air. Its essence was touch, and also sound since it had evolved from akasa. Vayu is the cause of life, of the vitality of the senses, the mind and the body.

In time, and because of adrishta karma, invisible karma, and its own innate disposition, vayu transformed. Now, tejas, fire, brilliance and heat, evolved from it. Tejas had colour and form. It was to become Agni, the element fire.

When tejas evolved, it emanated water. Having grown out of the elder elements, water possessed the qualities of sound, touch, colour and form. Its own special quality was taste.

Out of water came the earth, visesha, whose particular attribute was smell. It inherited, sound, touch, form and taste. All these developed from the tamasic sense of self.'

CREATION

'FROM THE SATTVIKA AHAMKARA, THE MIND WAS BORN, AND ITS GOD, Soma Deva, the Moon. Also from the pure ego, came the other ten Devas: five who preside over the five senses, and five that rule the conative organs, of endeavour.

The first five were Vayu, Surya, Varuna and the Aswin twins, who rule the ears, the skin, the eyes, the tongue and the nose. The other five were Agni, Indra, Upendra, Mitra and Ka, who rule speech, the hands, the feet, the anus and the organs of generation.

From the tamasika ahamkara, which underwent change, the five organs or senses and the other five of endeavour evolved. Intelligence, the ability to know, prana the vital breath, and the power to act emerged from the rajasika ahamkara.

Then, by God's will, these, the bhutas, the indriyas, the mind, the gunas and the Devas, were assimilated in one, and the body came to be.

When kalpas of time had passed, the Paramatman, the Supreme Soul, animated all these. He breathed life into the Golden Egg.

He himself came bursting forth from that Egg. He had thousands of legs and arms, mouths and faces and heads.

Those who know locate the different worlds on different parts of the Virata Purusha, the Cosmic Man. Seven they place below his loins, and seven above – the fourteen worlds, the higher and the lower.

The brahmana was born from the Cosmic Man's mouth, the kshatriya from his arms, the vaisya from his thighs and the sudra from his feet.

He created Bhurloka from his feet, Bhuvarloka from his navel, Svarloka from his heart, Maharloka from his chest. Janaloka rests on his neck, Tapoloka on his lips, Satyaloka on his heads.

The Patala called Atala is in his loins, Vitala on his thighs, Sutala, where the bhaktas of the Lord dwell, on his knees, and Talatala on his shanks. The Vairajah Purusha's ankles support Mahatala, the upper part of his feet Rasatala, and the soles of his feet Patala, the lowest world.

The Virata Purusha's mouth is the source of the organs of speech and their Deva, Agni, the Fire God.

The seven dhatus, the ingredients of his body, are the sources of the seven Vedic metres: the gayatri, the ushnik, the anushtubh, the brihati, the pankti, the trishtubh and the jagati.

His tongue is the font of taste, and the three foods – havya, the offerings to the Gods; kavya, the offerings to the manes; and amrita, which remains after these. It is also the source of the flavours: sweet, sour, pungent, bitter, saline and astringent. Varuna, the Lord of waters, is the God.

The Purusha's nostrils are the abodes of prana, the vital airs. Their rulers are the Aswini Kumaras, the heavenly twins who are the physicians to the Devas, and masters of all herbs and plants, and of every scent and smell.

His cognition of sight is the origin of the world of form and colours, while the sky and the sun are created in his pupils. His ears are the foundations of the tirthas, and of the akasa, and shabda, the sruti, the tone of the universe.

His body is the essence of all things, and of beauty. His skin is the font of touch, of vayu, and of all the yagnas.

His body hairs are the trees, plants and herbs, which are used for yagnas. The hair on his head, his beard and his nails cause rocks, metals, the clouds and lightning.

His arms support the Lokapalas, the Gods of the directions, who are the guardians of the world. His three paces are the refuge of the three worlds: bhur, bhuvar, and svar; they give protection.

Hari's feet are the sanctuary of all beings that are seekers. His penis is the font of water, of semen, of creation, of rain and of Prajapati. It is the root of satisfaction, which finds fulfilment in children.

His anus is the cause of Yama, Mitra. His rectum is the source of violence, of harm, of Alakshmi, the goddess of misfortune, of death and of hell. His buttocks are the source of defeat, of godlessness and tamas, which is darkest ignorance.

The Virata Purusha's veins and his arteries are the sources of the rivers and the streams of the earth. His bones are the cause of the mountains and the hills. His belly contains pradhana, unmanifest, primordial matter, which is the essence of all food, of the seas and the destruction of all beings.

His heart is the source of the spirit body, the linga sarira. His consciousness, chitta, is the source of religion, of you and of me, of the four Kumaras Munis, of Siva, of gyana and of the sattva guna.

Indeed, Narada, you and I, Rudra, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara and Sanatana, the Saptarishi, the Devas, the Asuras, men, Nagas, Gandharvas, Apsaras, Yakshas, Rakshasas, Pisachas, serpents, beasts, the manes, Siddhas, Vidyadharas, Charanas, all things animate and inanimate, all the stars and galaxies, all the planets, all the earth and all the oceans, and all the sky, the past, the present, the future, are contained in him.

Yet, He still dwells in the space within the heart! He is the Lord of moksha, the Illuminator of the soul, the Liberator, the master of bliss.

The greatness and the power of the Virata Purusha are boundless. He transcends the Golden Egg from which the universe is made.

When I was born in the Lotus that sprouted from his navel, I wanted to worship him with a yagna.

I gathered whatever I needed for my sacrifice from his body – the sacrificial animals, the trees for stambas, the kusa grass, the auspicious plot of land, the finest time, the Spring, the golden vessels, the herbs and plants, the grain, the oil, the honey, the sweets, the gold, the clay, the earth, the holy water, the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Sama Veda, the ritual called chaturhotra, the dakshina for the brahmanas, the vows called vratas, the procedures called kalpa and sankalpa.

Then, I worshipped him with the first yagna.

Your brothers, the nine Prajapatis, worshipped the unseen Purusha, and he manifested himself as Indra and the Devas.

Then, the Manus and the other Munis, the Pitrs, the Devas and Asuras, and men, each in their age and time, worshipped the Vairajah Purusha with yagnas.

Narada, I, Brahma, am the Creator of everything that exists. I am the incarnate Veda, the Truth, I am tapasya embodied, I am the first Prajapati; but I have not fathomed the One from whom I was born.

Why, just as the sky does not understand its own limits, He himself has hardly plumbed the infinity of his own Maya, his cosmic play. All the rest of us, deluded by his power, imagine we comprehend the universe. What could be more foolish?

I worship Narayana, who lies upon eternal waters, the glorious One of whose incarnations we all sing! I swear none of us begin to know his essential nature.

This is the first Purusha, the Un-born One, who creates every kalpa out of himself. He is the Truth, perfect, whole, non-relative, without beginning, without end, without change, eternal and alone.

When a Rishi's senses and his mind become quiet and pure, that Sage finds Narayana in his heart.

The thousand-headed Purusha is the first incarnation of the Brahman, the Supreme Spirit. He animates Prakriti, from whom all creation and karma flow; from which you and I have come, Narada,' said Brahma to his son.

THE AVATARAS OF THE LORD

NARADA ASKED, 'FATHER, TELL ME ABOUT THE OTHER INCARNATIONS of the Paramatman. I have heard that even hearing about them removes one's sins.'

Brahma began, 'The Lord Vishnu Narayana's Lilavataras are countless across the stars. I will tell you about some of his main incarnations.

First, he came as the Varaha, the great Boar, whose body was made entirely of sacrifices, of yagnas.

Bhumidevi, the Earth, was sinking into the ekarnava, the first and original sea. Vishnu appeared in a flash of light and a crack of cosmic thunder that blinded and shook the three realms. He was a Boar, more immense than imagination, and he plunged down through the waves to retrieve the Earth.

On the bed of the sea, the first Asura, the golden-eyed Demon Hiranyaksha challenged him. Hari gored him, shredded him with tusks like streaks of lightning. When the Demon was dead, the Varaha raised the Earth up on his tusks and flew up into the sky with her.

Ages passed after the advent of the Boar; and the earth was peopled by the races of men. Again, evil mantled her, and Vishnu came once more. He was born a son of Ruchi and Akuti, and was called Suyagna.

Suyagna liberated the earth again from the coils of darkness. His grandfather, the Lord of that first Manvantara, Svayambhuva Manu, called him Hari, the Saviour, the Redeemer.

His next incarnation was as the son of Prajapati Kardama and his wife Devahuti. He was called Kapila Deva, and he expounded the dharma of the Atman to his mother, and she found nirvana even while she lived in her body.

Later, the Muni Atri wanted a son. The Lord appeared before him and said, "Purest Rishi, I offer myself to you. I will be your son."

In that life he was called Datta, the given one. It was by his blessing that the Yadavas, the Haihayas, and the other great families of the earth were purified, and found Yoga, which is communion.

At the beginning of time, I performed a tapasya within the golden Lotus in which I was born. I wanted to create the worlds and all the creatures in them. Narayana, from whose navel the Lotus sprouted – which is why he is called Padmanabha, incarnated himself as the four Kumaras, Sanatkumara, Sanaka, Sananda and Sanatana.

Vishnu expounded the dharma to them; he told them about the nature of the Atman. Immediately, they were illumined, they were free.

From Dharma Deva and my son Daksha Prajapati's daughter Murti Devi, Vishnu was born as Nara and Narayana. These Munis sat in tapasya at Badarikasrama, and not even Kama Deva, the God of Love's, army—the irresistible apsaras Urvashi, Mena, Rambha and the others— could disturb their dhyana.

When Dhruva's stepmother spoke to him sharply in front of his father Uttanapada, the boy left home and went away into the jungle where he sat in tapasya. The Lord gave him an immutable place in heaven; he set Dhruva up as the North Star.

Vishnu saved Vena of old, who left the path of dharma. Powerful brahmanas cursed Vena, and the king was falling into hell. Vishnu incarnated as Vena's son, and saved his soul.

In that life, he milked the Earth for every kind of wealth, even as a milkmaid does her favourite cow.

The Lord was born again as the son of Naabhi and Merudevi. The child saw the Brahman everywhere, and sat like a stone, utterly absorbed in his immortal Self.

Later, at my own yagna, he appeared as the horse-throated, golden-skinned, Hayagriva. Vishnu is the Yagna Purusha, master of every sacrifice, whom all the Rishis worship, who is the soul of all the Gods, from whose breath the Vedas come.

Once, when a yuga ended, Vaivaswatha Manu found the Lord as a little fish, the Matsya, swimming ecstatically in the terrible waters of the pralaya, the deluge. Vishnu grew immense, until he supported the drowning Earth, and caught the Vedas that fell from my mouth.

Then, he came as that quaint Avatara, Koorma the Tortoise, and supported the mountain Mandara on his back, whilst the Devas and the Asuras churned kshirasagara, the ocean of milk, for the amrita of immortality.

The churning tickled him, and he laughed.

Still later, he whose laughter strikes fear into the Gods and the great Demons, came as a Beast from a pillar, the Narasimha, the Manticore, and tore the golden Demon Hiranyakashyapu's heart out with his claws.

Once, in a lake, a great and powerful crocodile held a leg of the king of elephants in its jaws. In agony, in despair, tears in its eyes, the elephant pulled up a lotus from the lake, and offered it to the Lord, and cried, "Purusha, lord of the universe, merciful one, save me!"

Hari heard the king of animals, mounted his golden Eagle and flew down to the elephant's rescue. He beheaded the crocodile, and drew out the elephant's leg from the jaws still clamped shut after the reptile was dead.

Though Hari was Mother Aditi's youngest son, he excelled his older brothers, Indra and the others, in virtues, in strength, and in sacrifice.

He covered the three worlds in two strides as Vamana, the Dwarf, and ended the final stride on the head of Bali, king of dharma, thrusting him down into the patalas, where that righteous king rules even today.

And to you, my son Narada, being pleased with your perfect bhakti, the Lord gave the Bhagavata Purana, his own self, which burns like a lamp in the darkest night of the kali yuga, and shows men their way out of delusion, the path to moksha.

When the Manvantaras change, and creation lies dissolved, and all its Gods are absorbed back into the holy seed from which they sprang, the Lord Mahavishnu himself keeps watch over the ten directions, like a blazing Sudarshana Chakra, himself.

His fame burns like a sun in Satyaloka, the only world to survive the pralaya with which the worlds end.

It was Vishnu himself who came as Dhanvantari, the original physician, and brought the amrita from the deeps to the Devas and the Asuras. His naamah mantra in that Avatara is AUM Sri Dhanvantaraye Namah, and chanting it cures every sickness. As Dhanvantari, the Lord gave the ancient science of the healing herbs, Ayurveda, the Science of Life and longevity, to men.

As the Axe-bearing brahmana, Parasurama, Vishnu slaughtered the arrogant kshatriyas of the earth, who had left the paths of dharma.

Then he came as the perfect man, Rama, prince of the Ikshvakus, now to rid the earth of the invincible Demon, Ravana of Lanka.

He came as Dwaipayana, who is certainly his amsavatara, to divide the Veda for men of the dwindled ages.

And as the dwapara yuga ends, Narada, he will be born again as dark Krishna, to end forever the sway of the kshatriya over the earth, to bring the legions of darkness and light face to face on a field of fate, and let flow a sea of warriors' blood.

And as the kali yuga ends, the Lord will come again as the pale rider, Kalki, who will end the age of evil and the world.

WHOM THE LORD BLESSES

IN THE BEGINNING, TAPASYA, I, BRAHMA, THE RISHIS, AND THE NINE Prajapatis – these are the forms assumed by the Lord.

In the middle of the ages, Dharma, Yagna, Manu, the Devas and Kshatriyas – these are the forms the Lord assumes.

During adharma, and the times of the end, the Lord comes as Siva, as Nagas, and powerful Asuras.

Ah, my son, not he who has counted the grains of sand across all the worlds can count the glorious deeds of the Lord Narayana. Not I, not the Saptarishi, or the four Kumara Munis, have fathomed the Maya of the Virata Purusha.

Anantasesha, who has a thousand heads, and two thousand tongues, has been singing the greatness of the Lord since time began. He has hardly begun his song.

But his bhaktas Vishnu delivers from the sea of samsara, and they lose all sense of being apart from him; they lose their sense of identity with their bodies, which are but food for dogs.

By his grace, I, Brahma, know the yoga maya of the Lord, as do the Kumara Munis, Sanaka and his three brothers, as you do, Narada, and your brother Munis, as Siva does, and Prahlada the Asura, as Svayambhuva Manu does, and his wife Satarupa and their children.

Priyavarta, Uttanapada, and their daughters know Vishnu's grace, and so do the Prajapati Prachinabarhis, my son the Siddha Ribhu, and Dhruva.

Ikshvaku, who founded the House of the Sun, has the Lord's grace; Pururavas, who founded the House of the Moon, has Narayana's blessing; the great protector of the Munis of the forest, Muchukunda, did; as also Janaka, Gadhi, Raghu, Ambarisa, Sagara, Gaya Muni, Yayati, Mandhatir, Alarka, Shatadhanvan, Anu, Rantideva, Bheeshma, Bali and Amurtaraya.

Saubhari, Uttanka, Sibi, Devala, Pippalada, Saraswati's son Saraswata, Uddhava, Parasara, Bhurisena, Vibheeshana, Hanuman, Suka, Arjuna, Arishtisena, Vidura, Srutadeva – all these were the Lord's chosen ones, whom He freed from the bonds of birth and death, and made immortal.

They crossed over the sea of samsara, and found the shores of freedom on the other side. They do not die at each pralaya, nor are they born when creation begins again.

Women, sudras, hunas, sabaras, even inhuman beings, full of sin, cross over the sea of samsara, if they comprehend the legend of Trivikrama, the Dwarf who covered the worlds in three strides.

Bliss is the essential nature of the Brahman, the Vairajah Purusha; he is forever untouched by sorrow. He is Un-born, eternal, eternally calm, free from change and fear, perfectly pure, Sama – he has no second, there is no other like him – beyond, sat and asat, beyond words, beyond the Vedas, before whom Maya herself vanishes with a blush!

Yogis, who once see him in their hearts, give up all their other penances: even as Indra, the God of rain, has no need of a spade with which to dig a well.

He is the ubiquitous Lord, whose blessings are always with us all, whose love is always with us. He is the one who confers heaven and hell on jivas.

To describe the Lord himself is an impossible task, why even to describe his incarnations is impossible. This sacred Bhagavatam is barely a shadow of the reality it seeks to illuminate.

But, Narada, this Purana can save a lost man, fetch him back to the path of light and truth: because it has deep enchantment in it, for the Lord Vishnu dwells in this arcane Purana, he speaks through it.

He who describes the maya of the Lord Vishnu, the Antaryamin, transcends that maya. Why, even he who listens with devotion to the Bhagavatam is purified of his sins, and finds his way back to the Lord,' said Brahma," Suka said to the king.'

So says the Ṡuta Ugrasravas to Saunaka's Munis in the forest.

PARIKSHIT'S QUESTIONS

'PARIKSHIT ASKED SUKA MUNI,' UGRASRAVAS CONTINUES, AFTER A BRIEF pause, '"Tell me more about Vishnu's incarnations, for I have heard Krishna enters the lotus of the heart through its door, the ear. And once he comes in, I have heard he cleanses that heart of every sin, even as autumn does the rivers of the earth.

Once the heart is purified, the bhakta remains with Krishna like a weary traveller who returns home after a lifetime's difficult wandering and trials.

Tell me, Enlightened One, how a soul, which is pristine and deathless, comes to inhabit a gross, corporeal body. I have been told that Narayana, from whose navel the lotus sprouted, which contains all the worlds, has the same form and limbs as a human, only His dimensions are infinite.

What is the essential difference between man and God? Where does the Vairajah Purusha, the antaryamin, abide, when he sets aside his maya of creation?

You said all the worlds and galaxies, and all these Gods were created from the Purusha's limbs. You then said those limbs are made of the worlds and their deities. What does this mean?"

Suka sat still as a stone on the banks of the river, whispering along to the distant sea, past the king, past all the holy men gathered around him. He waited for Parikshit, whose death flew nearer with each moment, to finish asking all his questions.

The king drew a breath, then asked, "Muni, how long is a kalpa, and how long is a vikalpa? How is time measured? What do past, present and future truly mean?

How long do the manes and the Gods live? Tell me all about karma and maya, and how men aspire to become Gods themselves?

What is the origin of the earth, the sky, and the under-worlds? And of the planets, the galaxies, the rivers and oceans?

What are the dimensions of the Cosmic Egg? What are the lives and the deeds of the great? Tell me about varnasrama, Muni, the classes of men and the stages of life.

Tell me about the yugas, and their different natures, and about Hari's most miraculous Avataras in each one.

Tell me about bhakti and the tattvas, and about the yoga of eight stages. What was the ancient way of the Masters of the eight siddhis, the occult powers?

Tell me about the linga sarira, the subtle body, and how it is destroyed.

What are the Vedas? What is their nature? What are the Upavedas, like Ayurveda and Gandharva Veda?

I want to know about dharma for the different stages of life, about the Itihasas like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the eighteen Mahapuranas and the eighteen Upapuranas.

Ah, Suka Deva, my heart brims with questions about so many things I always wanted to know, but never found time to ask!"

Suka said kindly, "Ask all your questions, Kshatriya, and I will do my best to answer them. Don't stop yourself, ask me whatever you like."

The king asked on, "How do jivas fall from heaven, and how are they born into this world? What is the nature of bondage and liberation? How does the soul find its true and essential nature?

Finally, how is all this maya the Lord's Lila, his sport? And how does he set aside his maya at the time of the pralaya?

I beg you, Suka, who are like Brahma himself, answer my questions in the order I have asked them, and tell me whatever else I need to know before I die."

SUKA REPLIES

SUKA SAID, "HOW DOES ONE CONNECT THE BODY AND THE IMMORTAL soul? The Atman's essential nature is pure knowledge, while the body is gross and always dying.

In the labyrinths of maya, a man appears to have many forms – that of a child, a boy, a youth, a grown man, an ancient, at times of a God.

Amusing himself with the Devi Maya, the jiva thinks, 'This is me, this is mine.' All these thoughts are illusions.

Only when he finds his Atman does he find his true glory, which is immortal, changeless, beyond time and dying, beyond Prakriti and Purusha, female and male. Then he shines forth, pristine and real, beyond every mortal concern, absolutely splendid, divine.

When Brahma worshipped the Paramatman, the Lord revealed himself to the Creator. He spoke to Brahma about the difference between the Atman and the Paramatman, the Brahman.

Thereafter, illumined, Brahma sat inside his golden lotus, and considered the creation he wanted to begin. But he could not fathom its immaculate method. He sat on fervently, with his eyes shut, plunged in dhyana. Suddenly, he heard a word of two syllables spoken quite near him, from under the water that was everywhere.

Tapa, said a voice, and again, *Tapa*.

O Parikshit, that word is the wealth of all those who have relinquished material wealth.

Brahma looked all around him, anxious to see the one who had uttered that precious word. He saw no one. He came to the edge of his lotus, and peered down at the azure water stretching away on every side, infinitely. No one did he see.

He sighed, and accepted his unknown Guru's counsel.

Brahma, the Muni of Munis, sat in tapasya for a thousand years of the Gods. Then, a light of inspiration shone into him, and he grasped the way to create the worlds.

Brahma saw Vaikunta in his dhyana, the realm beyond time. No maya existed there, and the beings who inhabited that realm had eyes like lotuses of a thousand petals.

All of them wore pitambara robes, and had beautiful bodies, four arms, and they were as brilliant as suns. Their complexions were varied – like coral, lapis lazuli, emerald, and the lotus stalk. They wore scintillating ornaments encrusted with precious stones of power and beauty.

Fine vimanas sighed along through the sky of Vaikunta, vessels belonging to the great souls who are always surrounded by lustrous young women.

And in an ineffable court, Brahma saw the Devi Mahalakshmi, Goddess of wealth and fortune, who is beauty embodied, why, she from whom grace and beauty originate.

Brahma, who wanted to be a Creator, then saw Narayana, the Saviour, attended upon by his main servitors, Nanda, Prabala, Arhana, and some others.

Brahma saw Vishnu on an immaculate throne, surrounded by the twenty-five Tattvas – Prakriti, Purusha, Mahat, Ahamkara, Manas, the ten cognitive and conative senses, and five tanmatras.

All the natural and supernatural forces were inherent in him, and He, the Master, enjoyed his own powers, and his own bliss.

Vishnu's eyes were red, and his glances were like nectar to his bhaktas. Brahma's hair stood on end, with the sea of ecstasy that surged in his heart," said Suka Deva to Raja Parikshit,'

Says Suta Ugrasravas to the Munis of the Naimisa vana.

Skandha 3

KRISHNA, UDDHAVA AND VIDURA

UGRASRAVAS SAYS, 'SUKA SAID, "WHEN ALL THE YADAVAS HAD slaughtered one another, Krishna sat alone beside the reverberant sea, under a pipal tree that grew on the hem of the forest near Prabhasa. His cousin Uddhava found him there.

Uddhava sank down on his knees and begged Krishna, 'Lord, I know you mean to leave the world. I beg you, take me with you!'

Krishna replied, 'No, Uddhava, you must go to Badarikasrama on the Gandhamadana mountain.

Listen, I will teach you the Truth. You have a mission left to fulfil on earth. You must travel across the world, and spread the Brahma Vidya I will reveal to you now.'

Uddhava sobbed with a grief he could hardly bear. But Krishna laid a gentle hand on his head and softly sang the eternal dharma to him, much as he had for Arjuna between the two armies on Kurukshetra.

Illumined by the short and infinite exposition, carrying the seed and the light of all wisdom in himself, Uddhava left Krishna under the blessed tree, and set out on his journey to the fragrant mountain.

On his way he met Vidura, and described the end of the Yadavas to the Kuru. Indeed, from a distance, Uddhava had seen how Krishna died, when Jara the hunter shot his arrow into the sole of his foot, piercing the only vulnerable part of the Blue One's body, the base of his big toe, with an arrowhead that contained the curse of some great Rishis.

Sobbing, Vidura clasped Uddhava's feet, and begged him, 'Teach me what Krishna taught you!'

But Uddhava said, 'No, I am not the one to teach you the Brahma Vidya. Krishna told me to tell you to seek out Maitreya in his asrama. The Maharishi will teach you the final vidya.'

Embracing Vidura, the radiant Uddhava, seeing Krishna and only him everywhere, went on to Badarikasrama, where once Nara and Narayana had sat in tapasya, an age ago.

THE BEGINNING OF CREATION

SLOWLY, SORROWFULLY AFTER HEARING ABOUT THE END OF THE Yadavas, and of Krishna himself, Vidura made his way towards the Ganga, and Maitreya's asrama nestling on its banks.

Vidura took the padadhuli from Maitreya's feet, then spoke of his meeting with Uddhava, and what the last Yadava had told him.

Vidura said, 'I have come to learn the Brahma Vidya from you, which Krishna taught Uddhava. I have nothing left to live for except to find the way to moksha.'

Maitreya said, 'I am so happy you have come, good Vidura. But your heart is troubled, I can see. What is disturbing you so much? Tell me, and I will try and clear the sorrow and doubt that have seized you.

Come, sit here beside me and unburden yourself.'

Vidura sat down. With a deep sigh, he began, 'Muni, I am an old man now. I have lived many years in this world, and I have lived with different kinds of men. I have seen good men, closely, and evil ones too.

I have observed that all of them have one thing in common – they all seek happiness, in one form or another. I have also seen that in their ceaseless quest for happiness, the only fruit they find is endless pain. My lord, it seems to me that this world of men is founded on nothing but pain.

I want to know what a man can do to disconnect himself from the sea of pain he is always drowning in. I am tired, O Maitreya, deeply tired of this mortal life. I want freedom, most of all from myself.

After the war, the Muni Vyasa gave us the Mahabharata Itihasa. I have studied its wisdom, I have absorbed its profound dharma. I have understood its basic tenet – that attachment is the root of grief.

Now I am thirsty for more than philosophy. I want deliverance. I want to hear and know about the Lord himself, and sever the knots that still bind my spirit.'

Maitreya smiled, 'An Amsavatara of Dharma Deva will surely ask the questions that you do!'

Vidura cried, 'Tell about all the incarnations of Narayana!'

Maitreya was silent for a long moment, gathering himself with an unspoken prayer.

Then he said, 'Let me begin where it all began. A Mahapralaya had just occurred. All creation lay dissolved into the Ekarnava, the single, primordial sea, the Naara.

The serpent Adisesha floated, in countless coil upon coil, on the ancient and undifferentiated waters. Upon his gigantic coils lay Narayana, plunged in Yoganidra, the great slumber.

All the elements, all creation, all time, were withdrawn into the Blue God, and lay dormant like fire slumbering in a piece of wood.

The three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, were perfectly balanced, and nothing stirred anywhere. Perfect equilibrium held all things in immaculate abeyance. And everything remained thus, unmoving, for a long, long while.

The ocean was infinite, as was the Serpent afloat upon it, as was the sleeping Blue God who lay upon the coils of the Serpent. Then Kaala, the Spirit of time, disturbed the balance in the three gunas.

The Rajoguna thrust itself out from the Blue God's navel as a slender stalk, a fine umbilicus. The stalk reached up high into the firmament, and unfurled into an immense, brilliant Lotus, which shed its light everywhere: on the sea, the Serpent, the God from whose navel it had emerged.

Vishnu's spirit flashed up through the stalk and entered that awesome, refulgent Lotus. Vishnu manifested himself within the Lotus in another Form, as another God. He became Brahma.

Brahma thought he was Svayambhuva, born of himself. He found himself alone, and that he knew the Veda. With wide eyes, he looked around him, and he found that he gazed naturally in all the directions, because he had four heads.

All he saw was water, stretching away endlessly, shimmering blue water; the only sound he heard was the wash of tidal waves.

Brahma saw he was seated in a splendid lotus. He peered down to the stalk of the flower, white and gleaming, but he could not see from where it sprouted. He went down the tubular stalk for an age, but he did not find its root.

But now it seemed to him that the waters of the infinite sea spoke to him with their waves, and the waters said, "Tapa, tapa."

Brahma found he knew what the two syllables meant. He shut his eyes, and sank into a plumbless tapasya. For a hundred cosmic years Brahma sat immersed in his meditation.

Then suddenly, he saw Mahavishnu in his mind. He saw the Blue God lying asleep on the coils of an infinite Serpent, which was as white as the stalk of the lotus in which Brahma was born.

The instant he saw Hari, Brahma became enlightened. He knew what he himself had been born for – to be the Creator of the universe.

Brahma worshipped Vishnu with some mantras, the original mantras, which arose in his heart on their own.

Vishnu said to him, "You shall have the task of creating all the worlds and the beings in them."

Brahma inclined his heads, "So be it."

From Brahma's mind, first of all, the four Kumara Rishis were born – Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara and Sanatana. Their father Brahma said to them, "Take up the task of creation. Multiply yourselves."

But the four were determined to seek moksha instead. They said, "We want to be free of all bonds, and you want to fetter us with great bondage."

Brahma was furious. Somehow, he controlled himself. But his repressed anger assumed a living form, and sprang out from his brow. It came as a red and blue child.

The child sprang forth howling, and cried, "Give me a name, tell me where I can dwell!"

Brahma said, "Stop crying! You are born wailing, and I name you Rudra.

The heart, the senses, life, the sky, air, fire, water, the earth, the sun, the moon, and tapasya – dwell in all these! Now go forth and multiply as much as you can, in your own image."

Now Brahma created ten more sons from his own body. They were Atri, Angiras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Bhrigu, Daksha, Marichi, Vasishta and Narada. Dharma and Adharma, Good and Evil, were also born from him. From his heart, Desire was born, and Anger from his brow.

His shadow resolved itself into a son, who was called Kardama.

All the worlds, all the galaxies issued from Brahma's mind and his body. The four Vedas issued from his four faces, and flowed into one.

Brahma clove himself in two – a male and a female. They were called Svayambhuva Manu and Satarupa. With coition, these two produced five children – three daughters, Akuti, Prasuti and Devahuti; and two sons, Priyavrata and Uttanapada.

Brahma gave Akuti to a Rishi called Ruchi; he gave Devahuti to Kardama Muni, and Prasuti to Daksha Prajapati. It is the children of these six who are the ancestors of the races of men.

ADI VARAHA

IMMEDIATELY AFTER HE WAS BORN, SVAYAMBHUVA MANU SAID TO Brahma, his father, "Tell me my dharma, what I should do."

Brahma was pleased. He said, "Create, my son."

Manu said, "I shall, Father. But the Earth lies submerged in the sea of the Deluge. Bhumi Devi is in Patala. If I create, where will my creatures live?"

Brahma grew distraught. He thought of Vishnu; he meditated on the Blue God because he could not find an answer to the problem Svayambhuva Manu had raised, himself.

Sunk in dhyana, Brahma prayed, "Narayana, you bade me create, but where will my mortal creatures live?"

As he said this, all at once a tiny boar, no bigger than a thumbnail, sprang out of his nostril. In a wink, it was immense. Brahma knew this was Vishnu come to retrieve the earth from Patala.

The brilliant blue Varaha tossed its head and roared so the sea stood up in waves, tall as hills; and the sky above shook; and all that watched, the original Rishis, Manu, Satarupa and their children, cried out for the great surge of joy that coursed through them to see that resplendent Beast, the Lord.

For a moment, the Varaha sniffed the air, he sniffed the waters of the endless sea. He snorted like a clap of thunder, and in a flash he dived into the waves, cleanly as a blade.

The ocean cried out; she could hardly bear him. On he plunged, heedless, down, down, cleaving dark water, until he saw the seabed below him; and glimmering like some magical ball on white sand, he saw the blue-green Earth, Bhumi Devi, a forlorn Goddess.

Varaha Murti plunged towards the Earth. Burrowing under her with his tusks, he lifted her onto curved ivory of incalculable length. Then, shining like a sun, he rose towards the surface.

A Demon barred his way. Sri Varaha slew the Asura effortlessly. His jowls crimson with the monster's blood, the Boar rose on up through the deep blue water.

Above, Marichi and his brothers, Manu and the others, waited breathlessly. Their eyes never left the placid surface of the sea. Then they saw submarine waves rising as great whirlpools, and the blue-green Earth broke into the light of day!

The Rishis shouted Vishnu's name, and He, the Boar, appeared; those who watched saw he supported the great planet, our world, on his interminable, flashing tusks. Gently, he stilled the turbulent sea with his hooves, and he set exquisite, mysterious Bhumi Devi down on the furrows his hooves made on the water, where she floated.

Brahma and the Sages began singing Vishnu's praises. The Boar cocked his head and listened for a moment, and then vanished before their eyes: He whom the first Munis described as being Yagna, Sacrifice embodied.'

DAKSHA’S DAUGHTER, DITI

MAITREYA MUNI SPOKE FERVENTLY OF THE LORD’S VARAHA AVATARA.

In the brief silence when he paused, Vidura asked, ‘Who was the Asura the Blue Boar killed when he rose through the sea, carrying the Earth upon his tusks? I have heard that, when he came as Varaha Murti, it was Hiranyaksha that Hari killed. Who was Hiranyaksha, Maitreya?’

Maitreya began the story of Hiranyaksha. ‘Daksha Prajapati was Brahma’s son. Daksha gave thirteen of his daughters to be Marichi’s son, Kashyapa Muni’s, wives. One of these was Diti.

One evening as the sun was setting in a blaze of golden saffron, Kashyapa sat before his yagna fire. He had just finished his sandhya worship, and poured milk onto the agni.

He sat handsome and bare-chested, and Diti, who stood beside him, felt a quick flame licking at her. She hardly knew why, but she was seized by sudden lust – she must have him make love to her, at once!

Softly, she laid her fine hand on his shoulder. Kashyapa turned to look at her in some surprise. There was no mistaking the flush on her face, or the trembling of her satin limbs.

She whispered, “My lord, Kama Deva torments me. I beg you, quench the fire he has lit in my body.”

Kashyapa said gently, “Wait just a muhurta. This is twilight, Siva’s time, when he ranges over the world on Nandiswara, with his pramathas. This is the hour when he gazes on us all with three eyes – the setting sun, the sacred fire, and the rising moon.

Even now, he is here, his golden body white with ashes from the smasana, his jata red with dust from the wind. We must not make love at this sacred hour, when nothing is hidden from Rudra's three-eyed gaze. Wait just a short hour, my love."

But she could not; she would not. Casting aside her clothes, she fell on him naked, stroking him with her hands and her lips, and her skin and her velvet limbs. Kashyapa could not resist her, and he took her there, sharply, beside the holy fire, even at the forbidden hour.

When they were quiet again, Diti grew anxious.

Beginning to cry, she said, "Oh, I beg Siva's mercy that he does not curse the child I have conceived! He is my sister's husband and he must be kind to me. I beg his forgiveness.

Oh, will he forgive my sin of lust? I am terrified, Kashyapa, what will happen to my child?"

Kashyapa, the mystic, gazed into the future. He said quietly, "You have sinned twice. You disregarded my warning. You disobeyed me, and you desecrated Siva's holy hour.

You will bear two mighty sons, but they will be evil. They will tyrannise the worlds, and spread terror everywhere, until Vishnu incarnates himself to deliver creation from them."

Kashyapa spoke prophetically, and Diti knew it would all be exactly as he said. Falling at his feet, she begged him, "Lord, I want one boon from you. Let my sons be killed by Narayana himself, and not by a brahmana's curse. For then they shall have mukti instead of eternal damnation."

Kashyapa laid his hand kindly on her head. "You are penitent, and half your sin shall be forgiven you for wanting Narayana himself to be your sons' deliverer. The Lord grants your prayer, Diti, and what is more, your grandson will be one of the greatest Vishnubhaktas of all time.

His devotion, in the face of the sternest trials, will be remembered as long as time exists, and men will emulate him as the perfect devotee. Why, Vishnu will incarnate himself on earth just to save his life. And your grandchild will be one of the few, the very few, through all the ages, to see God himself with mortal eyes."

Diti stood numb, with her head bent down, tears still trickling down her cheeks. She knew that a terrible curse still lay over her sons, for her sin. But she was somewhat consoled that, at least finally, Vishnu himself would deliver them.

She had some peace to think that her grandson would be a Mahatman, a great soul. But her heart gave a flutter when she wondered what fierce trials he would face, as all bhaktas invariably seemed to,' said Maitreya.

THE ARROGANT DWARAPALAKAS

MAITREYA SAID, 'DITI'S SONS GREW APACE INSIDE HER. FEARFUL OF THE curse, fearful for the future, she kept her sons in her womb with dhyana, for as long as she could. She kept them inside her body for a hundred years.

Her sons shone so brightly in her womb that all the worlds and even the Devas, the Gods of light, seemed lustreless.

The Devas went to Brahma in some alarm, and asked him what was happening.

Brahma said, "There is no cause to be concerned.

Once, Sanaka, Sananda, Sanatkumara and Sanatana went to Vaikunta, to worship Vishnu. They passed swiftly through the first six gates to his palace, and arrived at the seventh. Here the dwarapalakas Jaya and Vijaya stopped them.

Stepping in the Rishis' way, the gatekeepers said rudely, 'You cannot go in!'

The Sages looked at the two who were so handsome, so illustrious, and, surely, so very arrogant. The holy ones ignored the guardsmen, and tried to brush past them.

Jaya and Vijaya crossed their staffs with a loud report, barring their way. 'You cannot pass!' they growled.

The Kumara Rishis grew very still; they bristled with anger.

Sanaka said softly, 'It is strange that you two, who have been near Narayana for so long, are so vain. Perhaps, it is because you are so close to Him that you are so proud.

You show qualities that suit mortals more than Vishnu's gatekeepers. So be born into the mortal world, where rage, lust and arrogance rule. Being away from Hari should cure you of your pride.'

Jaya and Vijaya looked as though they had been struck by lightning. They fell sobbing at the Kumara Munis' feet, 'Take back this dreadful curse! We cannot bear to be away from our Vishnu.'

Sananda said, 'That we cannot do. But your mortal lives will be such that the Lord will always be in your hearts. Because...' the Rishi paused.

'Because what?' cried Jaya and Vijaya.

'Because you will hate him so much!' breathed the Sage.

'Shantam paapam!' howled the gatekeepers, meaning *Sin be still*! 'Hate our Lord? Ah, this is a terrible curse, Munis.'

Tears rolled down their cheeks.

Suddenly, Vishnu appeared there. The Rishis folded their hands to him. The dwarapalakas flung themselves at his feet, and bathed them in their tears. They clung to those blue feet, and would not leave them.

Vishnu said sternly, 'Get up now!'

He turned to the Kumara Munis, 'These two insulted you, thinking you were mere children, not knowing how great you are. It was right that you cursed them. A servant's arrogance reflects on his master. I beg your forgiveness for what they did.

Munis, no one is dearer to me than a bhakta, and nothing angers me more than when my bhaktas are insulted. Let these two be born into the mortal world, just as you have cursed them to be.'

The Kumaras wondered if the Lord was gently chiding them.

Reading their thought clearly, Vishnu said, 'Believe me, Holy Ones, I mean what I say. It is excellent and just that you cursed these two.'

Sanaka and his brothers took the dust from the Lord's feet, and went their way.

Now Vishnu said to Jaya and Vijaya, 'You two will be born thrice into the mortal world. In one life, anger, krodha, will rule you; in the next, kama, lust; and in the third mada, pride, will. All three times, I will incarnate myself to kill you.

Be assured that only I, none else, will bring death to you, and finally you will both return to me.'

'Lord, will we remember who we are, or remember you at all?' asked Jaya, trembling.

'No, you will forget who you really are, but you will think of me more than my greatest bhaktas do – you will be so consumed by your hatred of me! Three births for you, my dwarapalakas, spread across the ages, until the dwapara yuga ends. And then, moksha.'

As they stood there, in shock, Vishnu vanished before their eyes. Then Vaikunta, Narayana's eternal realm, disappeared around Jaya and Vijaya in a swirl, and wailing they fell down all the yawning mandalas, into Diti's womb.

It is Jaya and Vijaya's brilliance that pales every other light," said Brahma to the worried Devas and Rishis.

When she had carried them for a hundred years, Diti felt her labour begin.

It was a night as black as the worlds had never seen before. The earth shook with gigantic tremors, north, south, east and west. Mountains spewed geysers of lava from their crowns, and all the quarters and directions seemed to be ablaze.

Torrents of meteors flared down from the sky and some serpentine comets ploughed slowly across the darkness above, leaving eerie trails. A host of winds, of howling storms, blew in every direction at once, raising palls of dust, and blowing away the greatest trees like straws.

Black clouds scudded into the sky, and seemed to roar with macabre laughter – thunder – and whiplashes of lightning. The seas raged in great tides and spinning cyclones, as if in terror; rivers and lakes were distraught and the lotuses growing on their waters withered.

In hidden mountain caves, vast forces of chariots seemed to clatter, and other, uncanny thunder, not of any clouds, echoed in them.

Jackal packs came skittering into the towns and villages of men, and the females vomited blood and fire in the streets. Dogs everywhere, their hackles raised, their necks stiff and elongated, howled as if they clearly saw dreadful spirit hosts invade the earth.

Horses and donkeys stampeded, dashing here and there in frenzy, adding their whinnying and braying to the cacophony.

Terrified swarms of birds rose from their perches and wheeled in the sky, crying in alarm. Animals, and even the lords of animals, lions and tigers, sullied themselves in fear at the omens. Cows gave blood through their teats instead of milk; the clouds above rained hissing showers of pus.

In temples, idols of stone wept tears. In places where no wind stirred, trees rose out of the earth as if drawn by their roots by awesome spirit hands, and danced in the sky, before being dashed to the ground and bursting apart in splinters.

Every benign planet in the sky was covered by an evil one; the constellations wandered from their true courses, while their stars seemed to spit fire at one another.

Seeing these omens, everyone thought the universe was ending. Only the Kumara Rishis, Sanaka and his brothers, knew what the signs meant.

In some agony, until she lost consciousness and knew nothing more of her own labour, Diti gave birth to twin boys, while the earth trembled to receive them.

In moments, they grew to a staggering, incredible size. In weeks, they were as big as small mountains. Because of the golden sheen of their complexions, their father Kashyapa named them Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu.

When they were very young still, the Demon twins sat in a tapasya that compared with their grandsire Brahma's. It was the four-faced Creator that they worshipped. In time, Brahma appeared before them, shining.

Brahma said, "Asuras, my children, what boon do you want?"

Hiranyakashyapu replied, "Give me immortality, Pitama! There is nothing else worth having."

Brahma laughed, "Not even I am immortal. Ask for something else, freedom from death I cannot give you."

Hiranyakashyapu thought for a few moments, then he said, "Let no man, animal, or God kill me. Let no being that you have created become the cause of my death. Let no weapon fashioned by man or God kill me;

let me not die inside my home or out of it, by day or by night, not on the ground or in the sky.

Grant me at least this much, Grandfather!" said the clever Demon.

Brahma did not hesitate a moment, but said to Hiranyakashyapu, "So be it," and vanished. The golden twins set out to conquer the worlds.

Curiously, Hiranyaksha, who emerged first from his mother's womb, was always considered the younger twin, because it was thought that Hiranyakashyapu had been first conceived.

Hiranyaksha subdued Devaloka and its Devas easily; at his very advent, they hid like serpents do on seeing Garuda. We must remember that these Demons were in fact Vishnu's dwarapalakas, and with his, albeit now forgotten, boon that only he himself could kill them, they were certainly above any of Brahma's creatures, even the most powerful.

Having conquered heaven and earth in his brother's name, Hiranyaksha arrived at the sea, truly like a golden mountain with all the ornaments he wore. He waded into the water, beating down, with a black mace, any wave that dared rise before him, even if it was stirred by his own stormy breath.

Hiranyaksha had come to conquer the under-worlds, the third realm: the patalas.

Plunging below the waves, he saw submarine flotillas of the Lord of the Ocean, Varuna's, people – nagas, mermen, and great schools of fish.

Soon, the clear water was stained scarlet with the killing Hiranyaksha did. Varuna's legions fled from the terrible Asura; he plunged on down towards the secret worlds of nether, and arrived in Varuna's fabulous city below the waves, below the seabed – legendary Vibhavari.

Smashing down the Sea-God's gates, the golden Demon strode into his court. All the guardsmen, of strange species, who had tried to bar Hiranyaksha's entry, lay dead along the gleaming corridors of that palace.

Hiranyaksha arrived in the presence of Varuna Deva, seated upon his coral throne. Mockingly, the Demon bowed to the God of the oceans, who trembled to see him.

Sarcastically, Hiranyaksha said, "Awesome Varuna, Lord of the worlds, I know you once performed a great Rajasuya yagna after vanquishing all the Asuras of heaven and earth. Ah, truly there is no one like you in all creation, no one as powerful.

I have come to ask you, great Emperor, for a boon. I have come to seek the honour of having battle with you!"

And the Demon threw back his head and roared with laughter. Varuna did not reply at once.

Then, he said in a conciliatory manner, "Hiranyaksha, I have grown old and have long since given up battle. I am calmed now in my dotage and would be a poor adversary for you, incomparable Asura."

Varuna spoke with no less scorn than Hiranyaksha, but the Deva's sarcasm was better disguised.

He continued, "Mighty, peerless Hiranyaksha, there is only one person who is worthy of fighting you, just one person who might give you an even contest – that is the Ancient One, the Purusha, Vishnu himself."

As he spoke of Vishnu, new courage awoke in Varuna. His voice stronger, and his sea eyes glittering now, he said, "Yes, he incarnates himself again and again to rid the worlds of fiends like you. If you are tired of living, and ready to become carrion for dogs, go and fight Hari."

Hiranyaksha's eyes burned like sunsets. His roar shook the submarine city. He turned and stormed out of Varuna's palace as abruptly as he had come. Now he was determined to find Vishnu and have battle with him.

Obsessed, Hiranyaksha ranged the limitless sea in quest of Mahavishnu. A long time he swam, in the deeps and in the shallows, until once, suddenly, Narada appeared beside him, and said in some excitement, "Asura, I hear you are looking for Vishnu – to kill him! Is it true, Hiranyaksha?" As if nothing could please that Sage more.

"Of course I am!" cried the Demon. "All the worlds know that I have spent years looking for your God of Gods, your Devadeva. I wish someone would show me where the coward has hidden himself. I would be so grateful to that person."

"Then be grateful to me!" cried Narada. "I know where he is at this very moment. Listen. You know Bhumi has been submerged in Rasatala, on the bed of the sea, since the mahapralaya. Vishnu has become a great beast, a Varaha, to lift her out of the depths, so that Brahma and his sons can people her again with their creatures.

Even as we speak, Asura, the Lord is raising Bhumi Devi up on his silver tusks. If you hurry, you can stop him!"

Hiranyaksha went off like a streak of lightning in the direction Narada indicated. Sure enough, he saw the brilliant blue Boar rising languidly through the clear ocean, with the Earth perched on his tusks like a jewel. The Demon saw she trembled in rapture at his touch.

"Pig!" The golden Demon hailed the Blue Beast in his voice of thunder. "Stupid animal! Bhumi was given to us by Brahma. Dare you try and steal her from under my nose? She belongs to us now, to the Asuras of Patala.

I know who you are, thief. You have come disguised as beast, but I know you are Vishnu – Vishnu the mayavi, who never fought an honest battle in his life: Vishnu whom the Devas adore, but whom I, Hiranyaksha, mean to kill today!"

The Varaha Murti ignored him, and continued to rise through the deep waters.

The Demon flashed after him, roaring, "Coward! Shameless Narayana! Running from me now, are you? But you won't escape so easily. I have been hunting you for a long time. I have sworn to my people that I will kill you, and I mean to drink your blood today, Beast!"

The Boar broke water and set the Earth firmly in her ancient place. Then he turned snorting on the golden Demon, "Yes, I am a Beast, and only a beast would listen to a dog like you barking. But I am a kind beast, so I have decided to stay and help you try and keep your word to your people. Come, Asura, kill me if you dare."

There was such contempt in the Boar's voice, and Hiranyaksha rushed at him with his mace. He flew at the Lord, that awesome Demon, hissing like a snake! He swung his black mace at Vishnu, who evaded the stroke as a Rishi would the advent of death.

Lazily then, the Boar struck Hiranyaksha on his head with the Kaumodaki. Quick as light, the Asura ducked under that blow, and swung at Vishnu again. So they fought, on and on, while Deva and Rishi, Brahma and his children watched them, agape.

Each blow shook heaven, earth and the under-worlds.

Seeing how equal the battle was, growing alarmed, Brahma cried to Vishnu, "Lord, the Asura has my boon. Twilight draws near, and the time of his greatest strength. It is the hour of abhijita, the moment of victory: kill him now!"

With a smile to hear Brahma so anxious, Vishnu swung his mace at Hiranyaksha. In a blur, the Demon parried the blow with his own weapon, and Vishnu's gada was smashed in shards. But, in quaint honour for one so violent, Hiranyaksha waited for the Boar to be armed again; he would not attack an unarmed enemy.

The Adi Varaha murmured a mantra, and the blinding Sudarshana Chakra appeared. Hiranyaksha cast his black mace at the Lord, who caught it deftly, and offered it back to the Demon.

The golden Asura would not take it back from his antagonist. Instead, he summoned a trident, a trisula, flaming, and aimed it at Vishnu's breast. He cast it at the Blue Boar like a gash of lightning. But Hari desiccated it with the light-like Chakra.

Hiranyaksha sprang at the Lord and served him a blow like a tidal wave crashing ashore – a blow that could have shattered a mountain into dust. The Varaha stood unmoved as an elephant being struck by a garland of flowers.

Now Hiranyaksha began to use the darkest sorcery against Narayana. As night fell around him, he cast dreadful spells at the Lord.

Brahma and his Rishis, the sea, the sky and the earth shivered. Vicious cyclones spun at Hari from every direction, carrying spirals of dust. Barrages of rocks and stones fell out of the sky, along with thunder and lances of lightning, longer than the bristles of the Varaha Murti.

It rained blood and faeces, urine, flesh and bones, and severed limbs. Naked legions of rakshasis appeared, brandishing fell tridents. Phalanxes of yakshas, bhutas, pretas and pisachas rushed at Vishnu, with horrible roars and cries. Thousands of demons rode at him in spectral chariots and on the backs of nameless beasts.

Varaha Murti loosed the Sudarshana Chakra at the occult legions, and they vanished like darkness before the sun. Just then, faraway, Hiranyaksha's mother Diti trembled unaccountably, and an ooze of blood flowed from her breasts.

Roaring, Hiranyaksha rushed at Vishnu, with his interminable arms outstretched to crush life from the Blue God. But he found his arms could not reach around the Varaha.

The Demon began to kick and pummel the Blue Boar, frenziedly. Languidly, the Varaha drew back a hoof, and casually, almost affectionately, kicked the Asura. With an echoing cry, the Golden Demon fell.

For a while his body rolled from side to side, twitching in death's spasms. The watching Sages saw his head was shattered past recognition, and his eyeballs had fallen out of their sockets at the Boar's gentle kick.

In a few moments, Hiranyaksha lay still; he was dead. The Devas broke into song, while the apsaras danced for Vishnu. The Boar glanced at them, momentarily, then he vanished as abruptly as he had sprung from Brahma's nostril,' said Maitreya Muni to Vidura," Suka said to Parikshit,'

Suta Ugrasravas tells Saunaka and his companions in the Naimisa vana.

KARDAMA'S PENANCE

"VIDURA NOW ASKED MAITREYA, 'WHEN THE EARTH HAD BEEN RETRIEVED from Rasatala, surely it was time for creation to begin again?'

Maitreya replied, 'It surely was. Ahamkara was created from Mahat, which evolved from Prakriti of the three gunas – sattva, rajas and tamas.

Adrishta, invisible Destiny, stirred Ahamkara, and it created the five tanmatras, the subtle elements, the panchabhutas, the five gross elements, the five cognitive senses, the five active senses, and their Deities.

When all these came together, they created the Golden Egg. The Egg had no Atman, no Soul, and floated for a thousand years upon the waters of the Beginning, the Ekarnava, the single Sea.

Then, Ishwara, the Supreme Soul, entered into it.

The Blue God lay upon the endless sea, upon his Serpent Bed. From his navel, a Lotus sprouted, splendid as a thousand suns. It was the abode of all the living. Brahma was born inside it. Yet again, he sat in tapasya, as the waves told him to, and then he created the universe.

From his ignorance, the primordial tamoguna, Brahma created avidya of five forms – tamisra, andha-tamisra, tamas, moha and mahatamas. He cast away his tamasika body in disgust.

This body became the night, and yakshas and rakshasas, the first protectors, took it for their own. But this dark body brought ravening hunger and raging thirst with it, and the demons ran roaring at Brahma – to devour his flesh and drink his blood.

"Don't protect him, eat him!" they cried.

In terror Brahma cried, "You were born from me! Don't eat me, protect me!"

So the yakshas and rakshasas did not devour him, but took his night body forever; and they are the Night Rangers, who awake and live during the hours of darkness, which is daylight for them.

Assuming another body, irradiant, streaming light from every limb, he created the Devas from his face. When he abandoned that body of light, it became the day, and the preserves of the Devas, the Gods of light.

Brahma assumed another body, darkling, and from his genitals and his anus he extruded the Asuras, full of passions. In rut, they closed on him, to copulate. At first, Brahma laughed. Then he saw their distended members, and growing afraid, he fled from them.

The demons chased him in lust, determined to violate him.

Brahma fled to Vishnu's feet, and cried, "Save me, Lord! I created these Asuras at your behest, and they mean to molest me."

Vishnu said, "Abandon this dark body with which you have created the demons."

Brahma did, and that body of his became the evening. The demons, whose hearts were bursting with lust, saw the evening as a luscious woman, her golden anklets chiming, her waist slender as a lotus stalk, her breasts full, maddening, her hips flaring away irresistibly from her reed-like waist, her eyes red as if with wine and desire, her womanhood (imagined feverishly), all covered by a shining silken sari, hitched to a girdle with small bells, her face perfect, her glossy tresses deep blue like the midnight sky, her navel a deep, deep eddy, her teeth even, and her smiles so full of shyness and seduction!

Aroused past endurance, the Asuras asked the evening, "Who are you, lovely one? Why do you torment us like this?"

She stood there, playing with a magical ball, which she bounced incessantly with her delicate hand, and her feet followed it here and there. The Asuras took her for themselves, and twilight remains a time for sexual arousal.

Brahma laughed, erotically, to see this, and created the Gandharvas and the Apsaras from his laugh. He abandoned his creator's body once more, and it turned into enchanted moonlight. The elves and the nymphs took moonlight for themselves, to be their own. Their king was Viswavasu, the greatest Gandharva.

From lassitude now, Brahma created bhutas and pretas, ghosts and goblins. He shut his eyes when he saw them naked and wild. He yawned and abandoned his body called Jrumbha.

The bhutas and pretas took that body for themselves. It is when other living creatures, which are less than pure, yawn, we hear that ghosts and goblins possess them. The bodies of bhutas are made of four elements – tandra, lassitude; jrumbhna, yawning; nidra, sleep; and unmada, madness.

Brahma felt strangely exalted, and assuming yet another creator's body, he made the Sadhyas and the Pitrs, while he remained invisible.

The Sadhyas and the Pitrs took the invisible forms from which they were created, and that is why they are worshipped with the offerings of havya and kavya – the burnt offering and the poem.

With a vanishing, mysterious body, Brahma emanated the Siddhas and Vidyadharas, who are magical beings, and have the gift of their creator – to go invisibly in the world of forms.

Brahma anointed himself with golden sandalwood paste; he adorned himself with the most beautiful blooms of every season; and gazing at himself in the mirror, he created the Kinnaras and Kimpurushas, the Fauns and Centaurs, who are beautiful riddlers.

He cast off his painted body, and it became the dawn, at which time the Kinnaras, the Kimpurushas, and their women sing the praises of Brahma.

Brahma trembled when he saw that his creation did not multiply, and grow as quickly as he wished. He shook himself in angry spasms. The hair from that body fell, and became the serpents of the world, the hooded ones and the others, the venomous king cobras and the great constrictors.

It was now that Brahma created the Manus, who are the fathers of the races of men. Brahma gave his human body to these Prajapatis. Those who had been made before the Manus praised Brahma's latest creation.

Brahma, pleased, created the Rishis. To every original Sage born from his immaculate thought, he gave a part of his own body, in essence, an amsa that comprised dhyana, yoga, marvellous occult siddhis, tapasya, gyana and vairagya,' said Maitreya Muni to Vidura.

A short silence fell between them, then Vidura asked, 'Tell me how, after Adi Varaha killed Hiranyaksha and raised Bhumi Devi to the surface of the sea, Svayambhuva Manu created the first race of men.'

Maitreya replied, 'Brahma said to his sons Manu, Kardama and Daksha, "Go forth and people the earth with your children!"

Kardama Muni came to the banks of the golden Saraswati, and sat in tapasya for a thousand years. Vishnu appeared before him, mounted on the resplendent Garuda, and said, "Blessed Kardama, what boon do you want from me?"

Kardama cried fervently, "Lord! You are the Parabrahman, and having seen you with my eyes all desire has left my heart. There is nothing more I want. But my father Brahma told me to people the world with children, and I must honour his wish.

O Hari, I must have a woman upon whom I can father sons and daughters. Give me a woman, Lord, as perfect as she can be.

You are Kaala, the Wheel of Time. The swiftness of your wheel is inexorable; all creation is yoked to it and turns helplessly with it. Men's lives are shorter than they imagine, and they waste those lives pursuing every desire that stirs in their hearts.

Death finds them before they worship you properly, and all their short days have been wasted.

I, too, am a supplicant before you today, for a worldly desire. But, I beg you, Lord, grant me a boon of dispassion. Let me perform my dharma with perfect detachment, and throughout my days, let me always be ready to renounce the world and all it holds, in a moment, in your name, without hesitation."

Mahavishnu was so moved by Kardama's bhakti that the Blue God wept. Kardama's asrama was built in a fork of the Saraswati. A small, clear lake formed beside the hermitage, a lake of tears, and it was called the Bindusaras, and immortal trees grew up around it.

Vishnu said to Kardama, "I know your heart, purest of Sages. I know you will live in the world like drops of water resting on a lotus leaf, clear, untainted.

Kardama, I have already chosen the woman who will become your wife. In two days, Svayambhuva Manu, emperor of the world, will come to visit you with his wife Satarupa.

They will come here with their daughter Devahuti, and they will offer her to you. She is a chaste, exquisite girl, and she will make you an ideal wife.

Muni, Devahuti will bear you nine daughters, and those nine will marry the Rishi Marichi and his brothers. Their children shall begin the races of men. And so, you will have obeyed your father's command to go forth and multiply."

He paused to smile, and continued, "Then, Kardama, because I have seen your bhakti, I intend to incarnate myself in amsa as your son. And in that incarnation, Muni, I will compose the Samkhya Yoga in the world of men."

Vishnu vanished like gold won in a dream; Garuda's wings that bore him away were swifter than thoughts. Kardama sat down to meditate again upon his immortal soul, and to wait for Svayambhuva Manu. The Saraswati flowed like liquid gold beside the tall Muni, created from Brahma's shadow.

DEVAHUTI

SVAYAMBHUVA MANU, THE FIRST KING OF THE WORLD, CAME TO THE Bindusaras, and the charmed hermitage beside the Saraswati. He saw the shining trees and the magical beasts in and around the asrama. He saw the brilliant, sweet-throated birds, many of them singing rapturously, in the trees and on the ground.

He saw Kardama, a flame himself, who had just finished worshipping the sacred fire. Kardama wore matted jata and valkala, tree-bark, on his body, lean from his long tapasya, but bright as a moonstone from having seen Vishnu.

Svayambhuva Manu saw how gentle and how powerful Kardama was, and was gratified. He went and prostrated himself at the Sage's feet. Kardama blessed him, and offered him padya and madhurparka. Humbly, Manu accepted all these, and he sat at the Rishi's feet.

Kardama said softly, "I am honoured that you have come to my asrama, O King of the world. A king is an image of the Lord himself. You, O Manu, are the Sun, the Moon, the Fire, Indra, Vayu, Yama, Dharma, Varuna and, surely, Vishnu himself.

By your valour and your strength you are like Surya; by your appearance you are as handsome as Soma. You are so powerful that ordinary mortals dare not approach you, so you are like Agni.

You shower fortune and prosperity upon the kingdom, and so you are like Indra, the God of rain. You know the inmost thoughts of every man, so you are like Vayu the Wind, who goes wherever he pleases.

The powers to judge and punish are vested in you – you are like Dharma and Yama. Your depth and your grandeur are like Varuna's, and certainly you are Vishnu Narayana's amsa in the mortal world.

A king must be worshipped like a God. Tell me why you have come to my asrama, and if there is anything at all I can do for you, I will."

Manu seemed embarrassed by the Rishi's tone. He said, "You brahmanas were born from the Lord's face, to spread dharma on earth, to spread tapasya, knowledge, selflessness and detachment. We kshatriyas were born from the Lord's arms, to protect you wise and holy ones.

When you say you are pleased to see me, Muni, it is I who am honoured. I see from your face how kind you are, and I know you will grant me the boon I have come ask.

Holy Kardama, I have five children. Uttanapada and Priyavrata are my sons, and Akuti, Prasuti and Devahuti, my daughters. My daughter Devahuti heard about you from Narada, and she is determined she will become your wife and no other's.

The Lord Vishnu also spoke to me, and he too told me to come and offer Devahuti to you. This is what I have come for, Holy One, this is what I want from you. Marry my Devahuti, bless my life and hers."

With his radiant smile (which Narada had told Devahuti about, and it was this that had first touched her heart), Kardama replied, "For a time now, I have wanted to marry. I surely will not find a better wife than your daughter. You say she wants to marry me; nothing will make me happier.

I will remain with her in grihasthasrama until our children are born, and only then leave her to become a vanaprastha, and meditate in the forest, to become a sannyasi."

Manu and Satarupa gave Devahuti to Kardama, and returned to their capital, called Barhismati. This city had been built where Varaha Murti shed some of his bristles and hair, as he sniffed the air, tossing his head about, to catch scent of the missing Earth.

Those hairs grew into two kinds of grass, commonly called kusa and kasa, which are used by Rishis for many purposes. Originally, these grasses were called barhis, and Svayambhuva Manu had performed a yagna in

Varaha Murti's name, with barhis spread on the vedi. So, his city that grew in that place, was called Barhismati.

Later the lands sanctified by Manu's sacrifice were called Brahmavarta.

THE PERFECT WIFE

DEVAHUTI WAS A PERFECT WIFE. SHE LOOKED AFTER KARDAMA, LOOKED after his every need, even as Parvati had done for Siva, when the Three-eyed One sat lost in dhyana. Devahuti was absorbed in serving her husband; she was joyful and contented in her life.

Months passed, and she was as happy as she had been on the day she was married. One day, Kardama looked at her and saw she had grown thin and wan. Her face had lost its brightness; her cheeks were hollow, and her eyes lustreless from sleepless nights.

Her startling blue eyes were still full of love, but they had dark rings around them. She no longer wore a princess' silks and ornaments, but the simple valkala of a hermit's wife.

Still, there was never a murmur of complaint from her, but only the unswerving, joyful service to her husband. Now, this day, Kardama saw her, her clothes dusty, her hair unkempt, lean and wasted from too much work, and he called her to him. Making her sit next to him, he took her hand gently, for the first time. She blushed.

Kardama said, "Devahuti, you were born a princess, and you have looked after me like a slave, with never a complaint. You have kept your vratas faithfully, and embraced this life of poverty as if you were born to it. I am proud of you, and I know that the Lord Vishnu's grace is upon you.

Listen to me, woman, I can open your inner eye, so you will see the Lord, and then all your desires will be as ashes, and you will be free from sorrow, from the chains of samsara. What need have we for the pleasures of the body, when you and I have Narayana's blessing?"

She sat hesitating, her eyes downcast, the shy colour still on her cheeks at his touch.

He saw she wanted to say something, and urged her, "Speak, Devahuti, speak your mind freely to me. There should be no secrets between us."

Now she spoke in a rush, "What you say is true, my lord. But I am a woman, and like all women I want to have children, to become a mother."

The blush on her fair cheeks deepened, as she blurted, "And I want you, my lord, I want you desperately!"

Kardama smiled at her tenderly. He said, "So be it, then."

With his yogic powers, Kardama created a fabulous vimana – it was a flying palace! It was surrounded by fine gardens, set with sparkling lakes, and the palace itself was lavished with the nine precious stones, encrusting the columns that supported the magical edifice.

The gardens were lush with flowers of every season, in a riot of colours and birds and bees hanging over them. The palace had several storeys, emerald floors, coral doors, diamond panels and thresholds, gold pitchers that stood on great blue sapphires.

Deep rubies, blood red, set in the outer walls, appeared like the eyes of the craft (that castle in the air), which flew anywhere at all at the Sage's very thought.

Devahuti was astonished by the appearance of the immense vimana. Why, she who was once a princess and had grown up in a palace, now seemed to mistrust the enchanted creation; even, obviously, to prefer her rustic thatched hut to it.

Kardama said to her, "Go, my love, and bathe in the Bindusaras, before we enter the vimana."

Devahuti went to the sacred lake made from Vishnu's tears and, folding her soiled valkala on a rock, waded into the crystalline water. At once, a thousand lovely sakhis appeared around her! Palms joined, and with great affection, they led her to a beautiful pavilion on an island in the lake.

They rubbed fragrant oils into her tired, emaciated limbs, they bathed her languorously in a bath of scented water, touched her lovely virgin body with the rarest perfumes, dressed her in costly, resplendent silks that the queens of Devaloka hardly wear.

They adorned her with priceless ornaments, and magicked up a mirror of full length, in which she couldn't recognise herself anymore!

Now those water nymphs, or so they seemed, gave her food to eat, so delicious that she had never tasted anything like it before. They gave her a drink which surely contained amrita, the nectar of the Gods.

It seemed to Devahuti that her wasted limbs regained their old freshness and vigour, and she was again as she had been when she first married Kardama.

Her clear blue eyes shining, the sakhis led the radiant Devahuti to her husband, waiting eagerly for her. She saw he, too, was transformed, and now he was as handsome as a gandharva for her.

He led her into the vimana that was a palace. Vidyadhara women attended on them, and siddhas.

They flew at a thought to the steep, hitherto unseen valleys of golden Meru, where the eight Lokapalas, the guardians of the earth, go to dally with their women. The secret places, unimaginably beautiful, echoed with the falls along the course of the river of heaven.

In unearthly gardens like Vaisambhaka, Surasana, Nandana, Pushpabhadra, Chaitrarathya, and upon and around the Manasa lake, Kardama made love to his wife.

Otherwise, they blew like a passionate wind, quick as seeing, across all the worlds; and nobody saw them, or heard her cries of ecstasy when Kardama loved her with his Sage's great virility.

Kardama showed Devahuti all the wonders of the earth, and they made love by sunrise and sunset, at noon and at midnight, and all the hours in between, under sun, moon, and stars.

It is told that he made love to her for a hundred years, as if they were a short hour of desire, a few moments of rapture. They made love using their yogic siddhis, which prolonged their pleasure endlessly.

Finally, when a hundred years had passed, Kardama assumed nine bodies, and impregnated her nine times simultaneously. And, in occult childbirth, she bore him nine daughters, on the same day. All nine were exquisite; all nine had the rich fragrance of the crimson lotus.

When his daughters were born, Kardama knew his time of love was over; it was time for him to return to the earth. The dream time was at an end. Devahuti knew he would leave her now, as he had sworn, and begin his life as a renunciate, his life of tapasya.

Smiling bravely, fighting back the tears that welled in her eyes, she came before him. She still stood with her head bent, and scratched the ground with her foot, whose nails sparkled like jewels.

Softly as ever, Devahuti said, "My lord, I know you mean to leave me now. Our daughters will have to find their own husbands, for you will not be here for them.

But, oh Kardama, how will I bear to be separated from you now? It is as if your body is mine, and mine yours. In our love, I have forgotten everything you once taught me about God and the soul.

The fear of samsara, and the terror of being alone in the world are upon me, O Muni. When our daughters are married, and gone with their husbands, who will look after me?

I beg you, don't leave me utterly bereft. At least give me a son who will protect me, because I swear I am blindly entangled in the Lord's maya. Give me a son who will show me the way from bondage to moksha.

My lord, all these years, my love for you was sensual and earthly. Yet, I have loved you intensely, like my own self. Will my love lead me to moksha?

Help me, Kardama, I am the most unfortunate woman alive! I never sought the salvation of my soul, ah, who will help me now?"

She wept. Kardama took her in his arms, and said, "Don't cry, my love! And do not blame yourself, or say you are unfortunate. Why, you are the luckiest woman alive, because the Lord Vishnu will enter your womb, and be born as your son.

He will bring glory to your name and mine. Observe all the vratas from today; be perfectly pure, for you must prepare yourself to become the mother of God's incarnation.

When he is born, your son will teach you the Brahma vidya, and cut the knots of ahamkara that bind your heart to this world. He will help you find a way out of this jungle called maya. He will be a messiah and a saviour not just for you but for the world."

KAPILA VASUDEVA

DEVAHUTI OBEYED HER HUSBAND IMPLICITLY. SHE KEPT ALL HER VOWS, flawlessly, and she worshipped Vishnu, the Lord, day and night. In a while, she found she was pregnant again, and now the child in her womb was Narayana himself. He nestled in her body like fire hidden in the arani twig.

All around Kardama's asrama, nature and the soul of creation were in sweet, deep harmony. Above it, gandharvas played unworldly music among sculpted clouds, and apsaras danced to the songs. Showers of petals of light fell out of heaven onto the pregnant Devahuti.

One day, Brahma arrived in the asrama built on the island on the Saraswati, his son's asrama. With him, were Marichi and the other Rishis.

Brahma said to Kardama, "My child, you have honoured me as every son should honour his father: by obeying me. Your nine daughters will go forth and people the earth with their children.

I have brought my sons, these Sages, with me. Give your daughters to them to be their wives."

Brahma paused, then coming to the subject of moment, continued slowly, beaming, "I know that Vishnu has said he will be born as your son. Devahuti, the child in your womb is he. He has come to bring the Samkhya Yoga, the ultimate philosophy, to the world of men, and he shall be called Kapila.

The earth will be blessed that he walks upon her, and he will be the most perfect Siddha ever born. And you will be remembered forever, for being his mother and father."

Kardama gave his daughters to the Rishis Brahma had brought with him. He gave Kala to Marichi, Anasuya to Atri, Sraddha to Angiras, Havirbhu to Pulastya, Yukta to Pulaha, Kriya to Kratu, Khyati to Bhrigu, Arundhati to Vasishta, and Shanti to Atharvan.

The nine girls went away with their husbands, and, blessing Kardama and Devahuti, Brahma also climbed into his swan chariot, and flashed away at the speed of time.

Now Kardama and Devahuti were left alone in the hermitage. One day, Kardama, whose great joy and hope now was the Birth that was to be, came to Devahuti in whose body the Lord nestled. Devahuti seemed to enter a trance, and Kardama spoke directly to Vishnu's amsa in her womb.

"Lord, I prostrate myself before you; my Devahuti and I are a million times blessed that you have incarnated yourself as our child. There are so many men more worthy of this honour than I am. Yet, Narayana you have chosen my wife and me to be your parents on earth.

Your mother and I have been born into this mortal world because of our sins of lives past. Still, you chose to be born of my seed and in her womb, in this impoverished asrama – you, the master of heaven and earth!

You are the father of the universe, and you have blessed me, an ignorant, foolish man to become your father – God's father!

O, you are the Purusha, you are Mahat and the Aham Tattva; you are Kaala, plumbless time. You are Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. You are this world and its guardian too.

Kapila, Ancestor of all the worlds, Kapila Vasudeva, my son, I prostrate myself before you, and I beg you: Lord, let me become a sannyasi now; let me be rid of this samsara, this maya, forever.

Let me spend the rest of my life worshipping you, and at last let my bondage end, and let me find you."

Vishnu spoke to Kardama, his father, from inside the entranced Devahuti's body. "I once said to you that I would be born as your son. I will keep my word, Muni.

This Avatara of mine is to liberate those who want liberation from the condition called the body. Why, I have come to set men free from the linga sarira, the subtle spirit body, which survives from birth to birth, and carries its sins and shackles with itself.

The path I have come to teach has been forgotten in the world. I have come to reawaken men to the path to liberation. As for you, my father, it is time indeed for you to renounce the world.

Surrender all your karma, all your desires, to me. Conquer samsara, this sea of mortal sorrow, and then seek moksha for yourself.

You will find me within your heart. You will see the light of lights and you will be free. As for my mother, she is full of fear for the time when you will leave her. But I will enlighten her, also. I will remove her fear, and free her heart as well."

Kardama made a pradakshina around his son, who had spoken from within his mother's body. Kissing the sleeping Devahuti's brow a last time, he walked away from his hermitage.

Kardama went deep into the forest, and sat in tapasya. Now no attachments bound his heart. The three gunas were so perfectly balanced in him that he transcended sattva, rajas and tamas.

He no longer worshipped the sacred fire, but only the Brahman within his heart. He wandered the earth as a renunciate; slowly, he grew beyond cause and effect – pleasure and pain, heat and cold, and the rest.

He grew beyond ahamkara, the sense of self and selfishness. His mind plunged deep into itself, he became as calm as the depth of an ocean that has no waves but is always still.

Brimming with wisdom, he became imperturbable, nothing affected him anymore. He saw his own soul, and saw that it was the soul of all beings, of all things, and that it abided everywhere. Desire, fear and hatred fled his heart forever.

Death left him, and he saw the Lord Vishnu within himself, and Kardama attained nirvana,' said Maitreya.

DEVAHUTI AND HER SON

'AFTER KARDAMA LEFT THE FOREST ASRAMA,' MAITREYA MUNI continued, 'his son was born. And he was named Kapila Vasudeva. He was a brilliant boy, splendid in every limb, and golden locks of hair adorned his beautiful head.

Kapila grew up with his mother, in the hermitage cradled in a loop of the Saraswati. The years passed, then one day Devahuti remembered what Brahma had said to her: "Your son will be the Lord himself, and he will teach you the Brahma Vidya."

Devahuti saw Kapila sitting on his own, gazing out serenely across the river.

She went and sat next to him, and said, "You are my son, Kapila, but I know you are the Lord Vishnu. So, my child, I am going to ask you to help me.

I am tired of my life, all of which I have spent gratifying my greedy, lustful senses. Brahma himself said to me that you are the sun risen to dispel the darkness of ignorance in which our minds are plunged.

I am a common, foolish woman. Yet, Narayana himself has been born as my son.

I want to be free of the body's slavery, the slavery of the senses and their endless torment of desire. I want to be free of the feelings of "I" and "mine", of self and possessions that rule my life.

I want to be free of love and hatred, of attraction and revulsion, of all the opposite emotions that tyrannise me. I want to see beyond the veil of ignorance you have drawn across my soul. I want to see the Light of Truth.

I want to have peace, and to be free from the endless bondage of births and deaths. Surely I have lived many lives before, that you have been born as my son in this one. My son, O Hari, enlighten me now.

I am tired, and sick of the pain that is samsara. I know that you are the cause of Prakriti and Purusha. Teach me about them; set me free."

Kapila smiled tenderly, radiantly at his mother.

He said, "There is only one yoga that leads to freedom. In the most ancient times, I taught that yoga to the first Rishis. Listen now, mother, to that same yoga. It is called Samkhya.

It is the mind that causes either bondage or liberation. When the mind becomes attached to the objects of the senses, it becomes embroiled in Prakriti, the three gunas, and causes an imbalance of the gunas.

One guna begins to dominate, and the Atman is entangled in the world of pleasure and pain, in the restless, peace-less emotions. The soul is bound in the darkness of ahamkara, the ego.

But, as in the case of the Rishis, when this same mind turns inward and attaches itself to the Purusha, the supreme Soul, it liberates man from bondage. When the mind seeks its joy inward, it becomes perfectly calm; impurities like lust, anger and greed fall away from it.

That man's heart is filled with knowledge and detachment. He realises his own Atman is beyond Prakriti and its bonds. With bhakti, devotion to God, he realises the Brahman, the Light of Lights, the Sarvantaryamin, the ubiquitous In-dweller.

The mind by itself is neither good nor bad. Turn it outward to desire the objects of the senses, and it binds. Turn the same mind's passions inward to seek the Lord, and it frees a man forever.

Sanga, attachment, is an immortal quality of the mind. Let it dwell on Prakriti, and the soul is plunged in darkness. Turn it to Narayana, and all obstacles are broken, and the way to moksha becomes easy.

Naturally, the change from the outward to the inner path is a gradual one. The company of sadhus, Sages, called satsanga, helps hasten the transformation. And if you ask, mother, who the true sadhus are – they are full of compassion.

The sufferings that plague other mortals, both physical and mental, do not affect them. All men are like their own kinsmen, members of their own family. They have no enemies.

They are always calm, in the face of the severest trials. They walk unwaveringly on the path of dharma. They are unattached to all things of the world, and of the senses. Their only attachment is to God, and the ornament they value is their own good character.

Being with such men, whose only concern, whose only preoccupation is with the Lord, will remove your own attachments; for such men and women have this marvellous influence.

The truly sage always recount legends of the Lord, which please the ear and gladden the heart. Discovery of this true pleasure, sweeter than every other, will make you want to seek the source of the joy. This quest turns to bhakti, to devotion.

Mother, satsanga leads to rati, pleasure; rati leads to bhakti. Bhakti lights the way to God, the way to freedom, to eternal bliss. The man or woman who seeks freedom by seeking the Lord, the source of the soul, naturally becomes detached from the world of samsara, from the attractions of the senses, and their objects.

Surrendering himself or herself to God, such a person finds union with God, even in the midst of this great bondage of maya, of illusions.

I am always with my bhaktas; they always see my image in their hearts. And I grant them moksha, mother, whether they ask for it or not. My bhaktas are one with me; they never die.

My great weapon, the Wheel of Time, which finally grinds all things down, is powerless to touch them. To my devotees, I am all things – a father and mother; as for you, a son; I am a mentor and a lover, too.

My bhaktas have no fear of anything, because they belong to me, they are like my own soul; and all things in the universe, great and small, gentle and terrible, finally belong to me, and are mine to rule.

For fear of me, mother, the sun shines and the wind blows, the clouds rain, fire burns, and Yama, who is death, watches over all the mortal world – because I have created them to do what they do.

But my bhaktas are beyond all these, and they come straight to me, who am beyond death and dying."

Devahuti said, "O Nirvanatman, soul of nirvana, I am a woman of slow understanding. Tell me by which bhakti I can reach your moksha most directly: like an arrow striking its target?"

Kapila smiled affectionately at his mother. "For him whose mind is free of desires, one-pointed, always seeking Hari, unselfish, his linga sarira is liberated effortlessly; its sheath burns to ashes on its own, even as food is digested in the stomach.

Men and women who serve me in diverse ways, mother, covet no treasure of heaven or earth, but only me. These, too, I take beyond death; for only I, whose faces and eyes are everywhere, in all things, have the power to liberate souls from the fear of death."

SAMKHYA: THE TEACHINGS OF KAPILA

KAPILA SAID, "LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE PURUSHA, AND HOW HE pervades the universe. This yoga is the Atma Vidya, and will bring you to moksha. Once you understand it, all your doubts will dissolve.

The Atman in you is the Purusha, without beginning, without end. Self-luminescent, there is nothing that is apart from Him. He is ubiquitous: all things are of him, and he is infinite and eternal.

Purusha is primal; he is distinct from and transcends Prakriti, the world of nature. Purusha illuminates the universe. Subtle, divine Prakriti is Purusha's lila, his sport.

Purusha's flirtatious infatuation with Prakriti causes the universe. He is the refuge and the one who controls Prakriti. He causes the jivas, the individual souls, to come into being, and gives men the fruit of all their karma.

He himself, the Lord, remains beyond the gunas. He is actless, a perfectly detached witness, absolutely blissful by nature; yet, Prakriti and her gunas involve the Purusha in samsara, the wheel of birth and death, and bind him into the snares of time.

He is bound, yet always free."

Devahuti asked, "Tell me about Prakriti also. I have heard that she is as much the cause of this universe as Purusha is."

Kapila said, "Those who know say that Prakriti is Pradhana, the First Principle. Prakriti consists of the three gunas – sattva, rajas, and tamas. Prakriti by herself is unmanifest and eternal; she is both cause and effect.

Brahman strives to realise himself by investigating his own reflection, which is Prakriti. It is he who manifests and appears as the numberless individual souls bound in samsara and time. Maya is the power by which he manifests worlds, beings, and objects, which are in fact non-existent.

But he never manifests himself.

Brahman contains the effects of Pradhana Prakriti – twenty-four principles: five tanmatras, the subtle potential of the elements; five mahabhutas, the elements themselves; four inner organs or senses, manas, buddhi, ahamkara and chitta; and ten outer senses, five cognitive, and five active.

There are only five mahabhutas – earth, water, fire (which includes heat and light), air and space. The tanmatras of these are smell, taste, colour, form, touch, and sound.

The five cognitive sense organs are the ears, the skin, the eyes, the tongue and the nose. The five active senses are the mouth, the hands, the feet, the generative organs, and the anus.

The inner organ comprises four aspects – manas, buddhi, ahamkara and chitta. Manas doubts, buddhi concludes, ahamkara creates pride, chitta remembers.

These twenty-four are aspects of Prakriti, and the twenty-fifth is the Atman, the Soul, which is identical with the Purusha, God.

Some of the wise say that Kaala, Time, is God, Ishvara's supernatural power that brings fear, samsara, birth and death to the jiva possessed by Prakriti, and binds the individual soul in the delusions of ahamkara.

Daughter of Manu, it is Kaala that sets anarchy to the three gunas of Prakriti, which were once in perfect balance and equilibrium. Purusha is also Kaala. He dwells within all the created as Atman, and outside them as Kaala.

Purusha emitted his tejas, his energy, like seed into Prakriti, whose gunas were agitated by the Adrishta, the invisible, inscrutable destiny of the jivas. Prakriti gave birth to Mahat, which shone like gold.

The Cause of the universe felt the universe within himself in a subtle, potential form, and he wanted to manifest the universe.

During the pralaya, Mahat had been absorbed again into its Mother, Prakriti. Now, Mahat desiccated the heavy darkness of the pralaya by which it was covered.

Mahat dominated by the sattva guna, Mahat pure and passionless, Mahat the abode of the Paramatman: this Primal Mahat is the Chitta called Vasudeva.

Chitta was like water in its pristine condition, before it touches earth: changeless, utterly still, sweet, pellucid, taintless.

The splendid Mahat began to change. Ahamkara was born from it, triune – vaikarika, taijasa and tamasa, of sattva, rajas and tamas. From these, came manas, the indriyas, and the mahabhutas.

Here the vyuha – God's manifestation – to be meditated upon, the Purusha, is Samkarshana, the Serpent. He has a thousand heads, and he is Ananta, without end. He is the compendium of all the elements, the mahabhutas, and the sense organs, the indriyas.

Ahamkara is the Doer, as Devata; as the indriyas, it is the instrument; as the bhutas, it is the effect. As the sattva guna, ahamkara is serenity; as the rajoguna, it is restless activity, and as the tamoguna, dark sloth and stupor.

Manas characterises thinking and meditation. It is the source of desire. When the sattvika or vaikarika ahamkara was modified, Manas came to be. The wise know Manas as the supreme master of the sense organs, the indriyas.

His complexion is like that of the blue lotus in autumn. The Rishis call him Aniruddha. He is Kama-sambhava, and so also called Pradyumna.

When taijasa or rajasika ahamkara was modified, Buddhi was created. Buddhi is intelligence, the gyana of understanding reality, and the power of discrimination among the indriyas.

It is characterised by doubt, misapprehension, memory, sleep, and unconsciousness. Prana, life-breath, directs activity, and Buddhi controls activity. Prana and Buddhi both have their source in taijasika ahamkara.

The Tanmatra of sound came from tamasa ahamkara. From tamasa ahamkara, too, came the mahabhuta called akasa, space, from which the sense of hearing evolved, the indriya that receives sound. Sound conveys meaning and ideas; sound is speech. Sound communicates, heart to heart, mind to mind, by vibrating the akasa.

The nature of akasa is to provide space for worlds and beings, for objects, and to contain and pervade them. Akasa is also the abode of prana, of manas and the indriyas. The special attribute of space is karna, the ear, which receives sound.

When akasa was stirred by the force of kaala, time, the sense of touch, sparsha, arose. Vayu, the wind, came from touch; from Vayu came skin, tvach: the organ that gathers touch.

The main qualities of touch are softness, hardness, heat and cold. Touch is the subtle principle of Vayu.

The activity of Vayu is movement, gathering, dispersing, bearing from one to the other: as pollens from tree to tree, as fragrance from a flower to a nose, as sound from a throat to an ear. Vayu strengthens every indriya, all the senses.

Moved by destiny, Vayu and its subtle principle, touch, evolved the Tanmatra called rupa, which is form and colour. From rupa, tejas arose, heat and light, and the eye, which comprehends form and colour.

Mother, to lend form to any substance, to be co-existent and co-extensive with it, and to be energy, tejas, as well: these are the abiding qualities of the Tanmatra called rupa. To illuminate, to intoxicate, to heat, to dry, to invoke hunger and thirst – these are the effects of rupa.

Moved by fate again, called daiva, rupa was modified, and rasa, taste, arose from it. From taste, the mahabhuta water flowed, and from this element the tongue, which tastes, evolved.

Though intrinsically singular, rasa came to be distinguished as many: sweet, sour, bitter, pungent, salty, astringent, and all the combinations of these. Moistening, satisfying, exciting, making adhesive, refreshing, softening, cooling, being abundant, flowing, eroding – these are the properties of water.

When water was moved by daiva, destiny, the Tanmatra smell evolved. From smell came the element earth, and the indriya the nose, which senses smell. Smell, though one and singular, is also sensed as many – fragrance, malodour, and their infinite mixtures.

The functions of earth, prithvi, are to create an image of Brahman, to be stable and independent, to be a support to myriad, multifarious creation, to divide akasa, to encourage the distinctions in all the living.

The Munis say that the essence of all things is found in their effects.

When the seven principles, ahamkara, mahat, and the five mahabutas were separate, there was no creation, no universe. Then, Hari the Creator entered these with kaala, karma, and the gunas.

He disturbed the seven; he churned them together, and made the Golden Egg. From this Egg, the Virata Purusha arose. The Egg is called Visesha. It is wrapped in the mahabhutas, each elemental layer ten times the thickness of the previous one.

All these are enclosed in the sheath of Pradahana – the final layer, the body of Hari Narayana.

Actless, the Supreme God rose from the Golden Egg that floated on the waters of the origin. He entered the space within the Egg, multifariously. From this penetration, this enlivening, first the Mouth arose.

From the Mouth came Vak, the Word. With the Word, came Vahni, Fire. Then, two nostrils evolved. From these, Prana issued, and the sense called smell.

From prana and smell, Vayu came to be. Then two eyes were formed, and the sense called sight. From sight, sprang Surya, the Sun. Then ears came to be, from which the sense of hearing issued, from which the Lokapalas, the Lords of the directions, grew.

Then, skin was; and hair, beard, moustache, from which the plants and herbs unfurled. Later, came the penis of the Viraj. Now, semen came to be; from semen the first waters flowed; and after, the anus, whence Apana came; and from Apana came Death, who arrests the world with fear.

Now hands evolved, and from them strength. From hands, Indra, Svarat, was made; then feet, and from them, movement. Now Hari was born.

Veins and arteries formed in Hari, and from them flowed the rivers, and the river Goddesses.

The stomach was created next – hunger and thirst arose from it. From them, came Varuna, Lord of seas. In him, the heart was fashioned, and from the heart, the mind.

From the mind, Soma the Moon flowed out, and buddhi, intelligence, evolved. From intelligence Brahma, Lord of speech, came to be. Then, ahamkara, ego, then chitta, and from this kshetrajna – knowledge of the 'field', the individual soul.

But Virat was utterly inert. All the Gods who had come to exist could not bestir him. They entered their appointed places and organs, and senses.

Agni flashed into the mouth, beside speech. But Virat did not rise. The Lokapalas entered the ears, with hearing, but Virat did not show a flicker of life.

With hair, the Gods of the plants and the herbs stole into the skin. Virat was still. Varuna entered his penis, with semen; Virat lay unmoving.

Yama, death, entered his anus with apana, but Virat did not move. The river Goddesses entered his veins and arteries, with blood, and Virat was lifeless.

Varuna of the ocean entered his stomach with hunger and thirst; the Moon entered his mind with water; to no avail.

Brahma entered his heart, with buddhi, and Rudra with ahamkara. Still, Virat lay lifeless, like a corpse. Then, kshetrajna, the individual soul, crept into his heart, and at once Virat came alive; he arose from the primal waters, the Ekarnava.

As prana, the indriyas, manas and buddhi cannot awaken a sleeping man on their own, none of the Gods, the elements and forces of Prakriti could awaken the Virata Purusha, without kshetrajna.

So, mother, with bhakti, devotion only to God, which slowly severs the ties of attachment to everything else, with the mind made one-pointed with yoga and its gyana, one should meditate upon the pratyagatman, the kshetrajna, the soul within, as apart from the world, as apart from one's body.

Though the Atman dwells in this body created by Prakriti, the Purusha is beyond the gunas of Prakriti; he is beyond pleasure and pain, beyond life and death.

The sun may be reflected in a pool of clear water, but he is unaffected by the changes in the pool; he is beyond the scope of the pool. So, too, the Purusha is unaffected by the gunas, by samsara; he is free from karma and all the changes it brings.

He is immutable.

When the jiva is entangled in the gunas, he is deluded by ahamkara and thinks of himself as the doer. Because of ahamkara he loses his freedom, his condition of pristine grace.

Plunged in the sea of karma, he is enmeshed in samsara, in one form or another: if the karma is great, he is born a god, if it is evil, he is born an animal or a demon, and if it is mixed karma, a man.

Though the soul itself is never truly bound, the bondage of samsara ends only when the spirit ceases to be attached to the objects of the senses. The mind experiences joy and sorrow in a dream, even though the dream is unreal; so, too, the jiva experiences the world, even though the world is unreal.

Gradually, mother, with bhakti, you must lead the mind away from the world of the senses, and onto the path of the soul. The bhakta always loves me, Devahuti, in his or her heart: me, the antaryamin.

The bhakta sees all beings as equal, as part of himself; he is an ascetic, who has renounced attachment and the need for company. He hates no one, is celibate, and keeps silence, mowna.

He does his dharma, which is powerful since it is dedicated to God. He is satisfied with whatever comes his way in life, never greedy or ambitious. He is moderate in his habits and needs, a solitary, always serene and friendly.

He is reposed and restrained, has no dependence on wealth or property, but depends rather on knowledge of Prakriti and Purusha that can take him to freedom. In time, he or she sees only God everywhere, in all things and in himself or herself.

The soul is like an eye, like a small sun itself, which sees the greater Sun, the Brahman. The Brahman is distinct from and transcends the linga sarira. The sage who sees the Brahman becomes free of ahamkara, of samsara, the endless cycle of births and deaths."

Devahuti now said, "Prakriti and Purusha, I have heard, never exist one without the other. How then is anyone liberated from samsara, and the gunas of Prakriti, ever?"

Kapila smiled, "It is after many births, through which he or she experiences all the diverse manifestations and illusions of Prakriti, that a Rishi comes to a condition of being unattached to everything Prakriti has to offer, including the realms of the Devas, why, even the kingdom of Brahma.

To such a man who had abandoned his all to God, to Brahman, the worlds of Prakriti are like dreams to a man who has awakened from them – they hold no power over him anymore.

When that time comes, the sage discovers his own atman, and he attains kaivalya, the final state of grace from which there is no return to the delusions of maya, of samsara. His doubts are all ended, his linga sarira has been burnt to ashes, and the light of atma-gyana shines from him like a sun. Such a sage never returns to samsara.

But, mother, many siddhas grow attached to the miraculous powers they come to wield during the journey of the spirit. These are not yet liberated; they have not attained me, or moksha. To follow them is perilous."

THE ASHTANGA YOGA, THE EIGHT-FOLD PATH

NO LONGER DID HE SPEAK TO HER AS A SON TO HIS MOTHER. DEVAHUTI realised this was God, who spoke to a favoured bhakta.

"Princess, the sa-bija dhyana marga, where you meditate upon a particular object to purify and still the mind, also leads to the Brahman.

Those who follow this path perform their dharma as best as they can; they avoid heretics and atheists; they are forever contented with what God or fate gives them, from day to day; they worship those who have realised the Atman.

They abstain from the karma of this world, as much as they can, the karma of dharma, artha and kama. They tread the path to moksha, exclusively.

They eat pure food, moderately, and live in seclusion, away from the crowded cities and towns of men.

They shun violence and lies; they are austere, celibate, and immerse themselves in the study of the Vedas and the Shastras, and in the rituals of the worship of God.

They keep silence, control their bodies and breath with yoga, and gradually withdraw their senses from the outer world of the sense-objects back into the heart. They concentrate upon one of the chakras within the body, and meditate upon the legends of God's lila.

With such practices they purify the mind that has been tainted by contact with the world of the enjoyment of the senses; and the mind naturally begins its journey back to its source, the atman, its Self.

The yogin sits comfortably, in a clean, pure place, in an appropriate asana. First, he masters the complete stillness of his body.

Keeping himself erect, he next begins to control his breath. Once he is a master of prana, the impurities of his mind fall away like those of freshly melted gold.

Now he turns to the chakras along the spinal column. He fixes his mind on them, one by one, and with dharana burns up his sins, of this life and lives past.

With dhyana and pratyahara he withdraws his senses deep into his heart, to seek their Source.

He meditates on the Form of the God Vishnu, whose face is grace and compassion embodied; whose skin is dark blue like the lotus that blooms in the hearts of enchanted forests; whose eyes are reddish like the filament on the inside of that lotus; who wears bright pitambara robes, holds in four hands the Sudarshana Chakra, the Kaumodaki, the Panchajanya, and the Saringa; whose chest is marked with the Srivatsa, the mark of the Devi Lakshmi; from whose neck the scintillating blood-red kaustubha hangs; who wears an unfading vanamala, around which intoxicated black bees hum; who dwells, above all, in the hearts of his bhaktas.

He is breathtakingly beautiful: once your eyes see him, they will never want to turn away, but only gaze on, eternally. Often he appears as a boy of fifteen summers, he who is the father of the worlds, the Ancestor Un-born.

The bhakta visualises the Lord Vishnu as standing, walking, sitting or lying down. He frequently sees Him inside his own heart.

He dwells on the Blue God's exquisite feet, with the lines of the vajra, the ankusa, the dhvaja and the padma, whose nails are red like virgin earth; and the light from them, shimmering like moonlight, dispels the darkness in the bhakta's heart.

The bhakta dwells long on the Lord's feet; he thinks of the waters with which these feet were washed, the waters that became the Ganga. They say Siva bore the Ganga on his head, and became utterly auspicious.

The sage concentrates deeply on those feet, and the thunderbolt on them that shatters the mountains of evil.

Moving up, the devotee sees the Lord's legs. He conceives of them as lying on Sri Lakshmi's lap, and of Her gently massaging them, with her hands soft as lotuses – She, the Mother of the worlds, Brahma's mother.

His thighs the bhakta conceives (awesomely powerful, the source of all strength), wrapped around Garuda's shoulders. Vishnu's waist he sees circled with a golden girdle that is a belt for his pitambara robe.

He sees Narayana's navel, deep as a plumbless lake, and his belly like a cave in which all the worlds in the universe dwell. From that navel sprouted the Lotus in which Brahma was born.

Hari's nipples are like immense dark emeralds, glowing. Across his deep blue chest, strings of pearls, each one as big as a full moon, lie, glowing.

The bhakta dwells long on the chest: the refuge, the rest of Sri Lakshmi, Goddess of fortune, She who is his Shakti, his power. He sees the Srivatsa whorl there.

The yogin moves on to conceive of the Lord's throat, around which the kaustubha hangs, ruby like a crimson sun, jewel of the Soul. The dhyani then moves on to the Lord's arms, which are the support and the strength of the Lokapalas who rule and protect the worlds.

He visualises the Sudarshana Chakra over one of the God's hands, so brilliant one cannot gaze at it, thousand-bladed, the very Wheel of Time; and the conch called the Panchajanya, white as a royal swan in another hand; and the mace, the Kaumodaki, stained scarlet with Demons' blood, and the Saringa, the great longbow, so elegant and terrible.

The bhakta effortlessly sees the Vanamala around the Lord's neck: a garland made of wild, unearthly blooms in colours that men never see (humming with bee swarms), quietly incandescent, setting alight the bhakta's heart with its beauty.

After dwelling on these, and dwelling on, the bhakta now gazes at the Lord's face. From his ears, the yogin sees the golden crocodile-shaped earrings hanging, whose light illumines Vishnu's dark cheeks, and his prominent nose.

Wavelets of hair frame that peerless, perfect face: assumed like the rest of his form for the sake of his bhaktas. The dhyani sees the arched eyebrows like bows, and the black eyes flashing below them, full of mercy and tenderness, also full of sublime humour.

The bhakta sees Hari look at him, each glance healing the deep wounds in the human heart. He sees the Blue God's loving smile, so knowing, flooding the sage's mind with ecstatic grace, wiping away the sins of a hundred lives in a moment, drying up the sea of grief in the heart of he who meditates.

Vishnu manifests himself in the cave of the heart, in the body. The Lord laughs, full of pristine joy, showing teeth like kunda buds that are pink by the reflection of his lips.

Who, after seeing the Lord Hari in his heart, will ever want to see anything or anyone else? The sage melts in the tide of devotion, of ineffable love. His hair stands on end with rapture; tears course down his face, unnoticed; he drowns in the flood, the sea of joy.

Slowly, the bhakta disengages himself from his own heart, which is sharp like a fish-hook to catch the Lord. At once he dissolves in the Brahman, the Primal, Holy Spirit; he becomes that Spirit. He realises his own Soul is that Brahman. He is free.

The yogin who attains this final stage of union, Yoga, is not conscious of his body anymore. He has returned to his real Self, his eternal home, his Soul.

As long as the karma, which first caused the bhakta's body to incarnate in the world of samsara, is not exhausted, the body continues to exist, at the mercy of fate, which is the working out of that karma.

But he who has reached the condition called samadhi, never again identifies himself with his body, his ahamkara, or its temporal identity and its attachments. All that is a dream from which he has awakened to the light of the Truth, never to be deluded again," said Kapila to his mother.

BHAKTI YOGA, AND THE POWER OF TIME

DEVAHUTI ASKED, "TELL ME ABOUT BHAKTI YOGA NOW, MY SON. TELL me about all the different kinds of births, and about great Kaala, infinite time, who is the Lord of even Gods like Brahma.

You have come like the sun to illumine Yoga in the world of men, to bring moksha among the people, to awaken the sleepers in the realm of delusions. You have come to end the long darkness of their minds, O Kapila."

Kapila laughed aloud in sheer joy to listen to her. He said, "Many are the branches of the path of bhakti: as many as there are men! For each man's nature differs, his tastes and dispositions. Each one has varying mixtures of the three gunas.

The man who becomes my devotee in order to cause other men injury or harm, a man who is jealous, angry and a hypocrite, is a tamasika bhakta. The rajasika bhakta is the one who wants sensual pleasures, fame, power and authority over others.

The man who worships God for the sake of worship, yet thinks of himself as being apart from the Lord, he who dedicates all his karma to the Purusha, and wants no reward except bhakti, he is the sattvika bhakta.

Just as the waters of the Ganga are always flowing into the sea, so too, when you listen to the deeds and descriptions of God, the mind begins to flow towards Me, the Purushottama. This is nirguna bhakti.

These pure bhaktas do not want anything except to be able to serve me. They have no use for even the different kinds of mukti – salokya, being in the same world as me; saarshti, having wealth and glory equal to mine; samipya, being near me; sarupya, having my very form; and even ekatva, union with God.

All that the highest bhaktas ask, is for bhakti itself, and the opportunity to serve God. This form of devotion is the one that leads to nirvana, final freedom from the linga sarira, samsara, and the cycle of births and deaths.

The nirguna bhakta's mind is gradually purified by his daily worship. He is compassionate towards all the living; he sees me dwelling everywhere in all beings, in all objects even.

He has deep strength of mind and fortitude, and the greatest trials cannot shake him. He is kind to those less fortunate than himself, friendly to his equals, always keen to listen to the Shastras that describe the Avataras and their deeds.

He observes satsanga, is always straightforward in his dealings, and renounces ahamkara. Such a man is easily drawn to me; easily does he find moksha, when his time comes.

Just as the fragrance on the breeze captures the mind, the call of the Atman captures the man who is absorbed in bhakti yoga.

I am the antaryamin. I live inside all men. He who worships only idols, and ignores me, living in his own heart, is no bhakta, just a hypocrite. He is like a man who makes offerings of ashes instead of fire.

The man full of ahamkara, who identifies his body with his soul, who does not see me in other bodies, and hates his fellow men because of this, never comes to peace, until he renounces his selfishness.

God is not pleased by the idol worship and the empty rituals of a man who slights and despises his fellow men. The religion of such a man is not a living faith, but a dead one.

But a man who worships me as the God who dwells in all his fellow men, as their soul, the same as his own soul, he certainly is dear to me."

Kapila paused, then began to answer her second question, "As to the different beings, mother: the sentient are more evolved than the insentient. Those with prana are superior to the merely sentient; those with chitta are superior to these, and those with indriyas are higher than these.

Among the creatures with senses, the ones with only the sense of touch are the lowest, then those with taste as well, then those with smell, and still higher are the ones that can also hear.

Higher than these are the ones who can distinguish colour and form, and higher than these are the ones with teeth in both their jaws. Higher than these are those with many legs, then those that go on four. Higher still are the bipeds, men.

The four varnas are the highest among men, and of these the highest are the brahmanas. Among brahmanas, those who understand the Veda are higher than those who merely recite it. Higher still are those who interpret and can explain the most difficult parts of the Veda.

But then, a true bhakta, be he anyone at all, is superior to all these – the one who serves me with no notion of any difference between himself and God, he who has renounced all his karma, his very body, and his soul to my care, the one who has no ego, and sees God everywhere, and himself as being God's agent.

The highest man sees God in all beings, and worships him in them.

This, O Manuputri, is the Bhakti marga, and the ashtanga yoga. If any man or woman walk any of the eight paths, he or she will surely come to moksha, and find eternal bliss and freedom.

Bhakti is the very form of the Lord. Bhakti itself is the final end; it is both Purusha and Prakriti, and is beyond them as well. It is invisible Daiva, destiny, and the cause of all karma, this lila of samsara.

The Lord's Viswarupa, his Cosmic Form, is Kaala, Time. This is what causes differences in created beings and terrifies them, too. It is He who pervades all beings, and gives them life; it is He who, as time, devours them all.

He is called Vishnu, who is the lord of sacrifices, and the one who rewards sacrificers. Vishnu is Time, the king of kings. No one is his special friend or enemy. He has no relatives.

For fear of him the wind blows, the sun shines, and Indra sends down the rain. The stars and planets shine and spin through the vaults of the sky for fear of him. Plants and trees blossom and bear fruit for fear of him.

Rivers flow to obey his will, and for that too the sea does not break his bounds. Fire burns for him, and the earth keeps her steady course through the sky.

For him the sky contains all the galaxies, and for him did Mahat originally expand into the seven sheaths of creation. For fear of him do Brahma and the Devas rule the world and its creatures, from yuga to yuga, kalpa after kalpa.

He has no beginning or end, but he begins and ends all things. He is changeless, and the cause of the birth of all beings, and their death, and finally he is the death of Death."

SAMSARA AND THE NARAKAS

KAPILA CONTINUED, "EVEN AS THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY CANNOT fathom the wind that scatters them, so too, men hardly understand Kaala, which impels them. All men's efforts to acquire the things of the senses are finally in vain. God blows them away in time like the wind does clouds.

It is ignorance that makes a man think of his gold or his houses or lands as being permanent. In fact, these and even the body that enjoys them are as transient as clouds in the sky.

A jiva feels happy with every birth into which he is born. Why, even when he is born in hell he rejoices, thinking of hell as being heaven. The body that binds him is truly a product of hell, a terrible dark prison.

Still, a man will not think of abandoning it, but is attached to it and loves it like his own self, his most precious possession. His heart plunges its roots of delusion deep, deep into his wife, his children, his home, his money, his friends and relatives; and the fool thinks himself great and happy.

His whole body burns with anxiety to support, to prolong this life of his. His senses are bewitched by the secret seductions of prostitutes. They are also ensnared by the sweet voices of his children.

He borrows money, at exorbitant interest, to support his extravagant life, his secret women, and their children. Slowly, more entangled with every day that passes, he descends deeper into hell.

His mind mired in greed and lust, soon finding no satisfaction anywhere, he finds himself deeper in debt. He loses the respect of his wife, his children, his mistresses, and all his friends.

He becomes a shrivelled, crooked being, quickly diseased and housebound, because he has nowhere to go, living like an unhappy dog, feeding on the scraps that are thrown to him. He cannot see clearly anymore, he can hardly hear.

His breath chokes in his windpipe, and at long last, after a dreadful time of suffering, death comes to him – as no friend, but bringing more torments for all his indulgences, all his sins, all the grief he has caused.

As his prana leaves his body, he see two terrible, red-eyed Yamadutas, their gazes wrathful. His bowels open, and his bladder, when he sees them. They tie a noose around his throat, and haul him along death's horrible path. They shut him up, the jiva, in a body designed to cause him the utmost pain and grief.

They yell coarse and hideous threats at him in their awful voices. He trembles, sullies himself over and over; his heart shatters into a thousand pieces. Savage dogs tear at his flesh along the way to hell.

He remembers his sins, every last one, as if they are being branded with flaming irons across his eyes and onto his brain. Hunger and thirst ravage him, but he gets neither food nor drink.

He is dragged on and on, interminably, on the burning path longer than life, over blazing sands, until the skin comes off his back and arms, his chest and his legs.

Flaming winds sear him, frying his flesh. Whips of many thongs fall across his back again and again, across raw flesh. His cries echo in that dreadful waste.

Occasionally, he faints from the torment. But then, he is roused immediately and dragged on by the path of curses to Yama's house.

The road is long, ninety-nine thousand yojanas long. But he is pulled along its entire length in just two muhurtas, less than two hours. Often, when they stop, someone carves his flesh from his body, and makes him eat it. Often, his skinless flesh is burnt with brands of fire.

Then, there are the vultures and the ravening hounds of hell – these tear out his entrails, while his screams pierce the nothingness all around.

At times, hosts of scorpions, serpents, armies of ants and swarms of wasps and bees attack him, stinging him unendurably.

The Yamadutas frequently dismember him, chopping off his limbs one by one. He is trampled on by elephants, cast down from mountaintops, sealed in airless caves or drowned in water, again and again.

The hells called tamisra, andha-tamisra (which is a realm of pitch darkness), raurava and some others are reserved for adulterers. Mother, people say that heaven and hell are all to be found in this world, and perhaps that is also true because we find every manner of torment and pleasure here.

So, the life that most people call normal can in fact turn into a straight road to hell, if sins are the only karma a man collects along its course. What appears to be the same road that two men walk through their lives can lead one to heaven and the other to hell, depending on how they traverse that road, the years of their lives.

According to their karma, jivas are born again and again, and die also thus – evolving or devolving, as they have lived, compassionately or cruelly."

THE TORMENTS OF THE JIVA, THE RAJASI GATI

KAPILA WENT ON, "IT IS GOD WHO HOLDS THE NUMBERLESS THREADS of karma in his hands, and makes the jivas live and die like puppets, by their karma.

Being born into this world is the first torment – the confinement in the darkness of the womb. Before being born, the jiva remembers his sins of the last hundred births, and not able to cry or even sigh, he suffers for them, crouched there inside his mother, next to her faeces and her urine, praying silently to God to be delivered.

Then, birth – the wild and savage expulsion into a strange world, and circumstance. The Rishis say that a great wind blows inside the womb, expelling the foetus so violently, that he forgets who he is, who he was. He comes absolutely ignorant into the world of sorrows.

All that he identifies himself with is his body; its raging hungers and thirsts he makes his own, and spends the rest of his years feeding them, in one way or another.

It is the body that torments the jiva, birth after birth, death after death; yet, bound in the darkness of avidya, ignorance, it is the body he serves, and entangles himself deeper and deeper in the cycle of samsara.

The company a man keeps during his life is so important. If his friends and relatives are sensuous, lustful men and women, he, too, will devolve with them.

Truthfulness, purity, mercy, the golden quality of silence, true intelligence and discrimination, a sense of the final aim of life, why, even affluence, modesty, fame, tolerance, restraint of the senses and the mind – all these diminish sharply if the company a man keeps is base.

One should avoid men who are evil, who identify themselves utterly with the body and its pleasures, and who live only to gratify themselves. One must shun those who lack serenity, who are overmuch influenced by women and their fleeting charms. Men are never as deluded, as servile, as bound, as when they are ruled by women: their own wives or other women.

Brahma himself saw his own daughter and was enchanted by her. She assumed the form of a hind, and he immediately became a rutting stag and pursued her.

Ah, with the exception of the Muni Narayana, who else is above the temptation of women? It is my Maya that assumes the form of a woman and seduces a man. By a slight arch of her exquisite brow she brings the conquerors of the earth to her feet.

Let no man who wants to have moksha associate himself with women. There is no other bondage in the three worlds like the bondage of these. The yogins of the spirit call women the gateway to hell.

Let the loveliest woman come to a man, and if he is wise he will see her for what she truly is – a deep pit covered over by green grass, his very death!

So, too, let a woman who wants liberation look upon her suitor, the man who would be her lover, or her husband, as her death. The home, with a spouse and children in it, which all men and women are raised to believe is what they are born for (and that it is the final happiness), is the vilest death-trap for the jiva.

Make no mistake about this, there are no exceptions to the rule. The unions of the flesh are all unions of bondage, or tyranny and slavery, of the deepest anguish.

The jiva wanders from life to death, and back again to life. The linga sarira, the spirit body, assumes one corporeal body after another, each one determined by the jiva's karma.

Death claims the sthula sarira, the gross body of flesh, but not the jiva itself. The jiva journeys through a much vaster trajectory of time, of thousands of births – evolving during some, devolving during others, paying for his old karma and always accumulating new karma.

Only after countless births, human and others, does the jiva become ripe enough to approach moksha, to actually strive for it.

Yet, the truly wise are never attached to their gross bodies, nor even to their linga sariras. They are the seekers, the awakened ones who firmly tread the high road of yoga and vairagya, the road to nirvana," said Kapila.

BHAKTIYOGA, THE HIGH ROAD

THE AVATARA, DEVAHUTI'S SON, CONTINUED, "NOT ALL MORTAL MEN are evil. There are those who worship the Gods and the manes, and perform their dharma. These gain artha and kama, wealth and enjoyment. Yet, these, also, forget about the atman, and moksha.

They drink the Soma rasa, and when they die, attain the realm of Soma Deva, the Moon, the heavenly world of the ancestors. Here they experience every pleasure according to their punya. Inevitably, the punya is exhausted; they are born again into the mortal world, and begin their ritual worship once more.

And when Hari, who lies upon Ananta, falls asleep on his serpent bed at the time of the pralaya, the end of Brahma's day, the realms of the Pitrs are also dissolved in the deluge, when night falls on creation.

There are other men, who perform nishkama karma, perform their own dharma (svadharma), with no attachments for its fruit. These men, who have renounced ahamkara, and have no sense of I or mine, who are pure in heart and mind, pass through the portals of the sun and reach the Purusha, the Lord of the universe.

Jivas who meditate on Brahma remain in his Satyaloka until the time of the Mahapralaya, at the end of a thousand cosmic years, a Paraardha, when Brahma withdraws the mahabhutas, the elements, the mind, manas, the indriyas and their objects and ahamkara, as well, back into himself.

Brahma then becomes one with Mulaprakriti, of three perfectly balanced gunas, and is absorbed into the unmanifest Brahman, the Primordial Spirit.

Yogins who have mastered their prana are absorbed into the Parabrahman, with Brahma. But those who still have ahamkara are not entirely absorbed. They return to mortal birth and rebirth, until finally they also come to wisdom, perhaps in another kalpa, and find moksha, freedom from birth.

Perfect wisdom is the final fruit of creation, Enlightenment. It occurs after not just many lives and deaths, but many kalpas of experience in the universe.

Mother, the path is simple – seek the Blue God who is enshrined in your own heart in a lotus of the spirit. Seek him with bhakti, and he will set you free.

Why the rest, even Brahma dies and is born again: even he who bears the Vedas inside himself, who is the first Creator of all things, of the Gods, and the first Rishis, illuminators of the way to salvation.

He too is subject to birth and rebirth, because of vestigial ahamkara, the notion of being apart from the Purusha, the Brahman. When after the long sleep of all things, the sleep of Vishnu, the gunas in Prakriti are disturbed again, a lotus unfurls from the navel of the sleeping Blue God and Brahma is born inside it, yet again.

And then, the Rishis, the worlds, the stars, the galaxies, the universe, jivas, all things come to be once more.

But for those who earnestly practise bhakti, walk the sacred path of devotion, the Lord delivers them from the wheel of time. These bhaktas realise the Brahman within themselves, and they are absorbed in the sea of infinite joy, the sea of union with God.

The Parabrahman is pure gyana; he is the Atman, the Purusha and Iswara too. He is the knower, the thing that is known, and the act of knowing.

It is complete detachment that the yogin seeks, by treading any of the paths to salvation. In the condition of perfect detachment, the Brahman is realised, the One without a second, the one with no qualities or attributes, the one who is the very nature of knowledge, of consciousness, of truth, of ecstasy.

Only He is real, only He truly exists, all the rest is illusion, maya.

The way that leads to the Brahman is the way of gyana, of knowledge. This is a path that is difficult for embodied beings to tread, for the Brahman is hard to obtain.

But the other way, the way of bhakti, which also leads to the same end, is the easier way for embodied jivas to embrace. It, too, is gradual; and not his will but the Lord's delivers the bhakta from the coils of samsara.

Just as the same object is perceived differently by the different senses – as in touching, listening to, or seeing – so, too, the Lord is perceived and found, also in different ways, by the different paths that lead to him, as well as by the different Shastras.

By yagnas, by daana, by studying the Vedas and other scriptures, by dhyana and tapasya, by restraining the mind and the body, and by renouncing all karma to the Lord; with the ashtanga yoga of the eight stages, by walking the way of bhakti, by clear knowledge of the nature of the atman, by vairagya – the Godhead is realised, either the nirguna Brahman or the saguna Ishta Devata, and the jiva is liberated from maya, the conditions of delusion.

These are the paths of bhakti and the nature of Kaala, who is unmanifest but pervasive, and brings death and birth to all beings. When the soul is entangled in samsara, he no longer knows his own true nature.

But this Samkhya Shastra I have just given you must never be taught to a dull man or an evil one, to an arrogant, undisciplined man or to a hypocrite. Not the greedy man or the one who is attached to his wealth and his property is fit to receive this knowledge, nor the man who is not my bhakta.

No enemy of my bhaktas should be taught this precious Shastra, but only to my devotees, who are modest, restrained, without envy; who serve their elders and their gurus with pleasure; who are friends to all beings; who are detached, in mind and body; who are always calm; who are pure, and to whom I am their dearest loved one.

For, my mother, if a pure man hears this Shastra even once, or narrates it to others who are like-minded, he will attain to my eternal abode, and become a jivanmukta," said the splendid Kapila,' Maitreya Muni told Vidura.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF DEVAHUTI

WHEN MAITREYA PAUSED, VIDURA, HIS EYES AGLOW WITH THE PURANA he was hearing, asked breathlessly, 'What happened next?'

Maitreya, friend of all, continued in his gentle, powerful way, 'Hearing her son's discourse, the Lord's own Shastra, Devahuti found herself awakened in an unprecedented manner. She saw through the veil of illusions that had wrapped her mind in darkness and ignorance. She saw the pristine light that radiated from Kapila.

Tears of mystic joy in her eyes, Devahuti said to her son, "Even Brahma, who was born in the lotus that sprouted from your navel, O Padmanabha, could not see you as you lay on your serpent bed upon the cosmic waters. Even he performed tapasya, as the waters told him to, before he saw you with the eyes of his heart.

You are beyond all comprehension, O Creator of all the worlds and all things found in them! You are the master of the jivas, for whom your have created this awesome universe.

Yet you, the Un-born One, were born from my body – you in whose belly all the universe lay, you who floated upon a pipal leaf on the sea of infinity after the pralaya, as a bright blue baby, sucking your toe!

Your Avataras are many, and terrible when you come to punish the evil ones, the mighty ones who terrorise the world. But this Avatara is the most gentle one, my son, when you have come to show men the way to moksha.

If a man just hears your name being spoken, with bhakti, and more, if he listens to your precious shastra, he shall have a thousand lifetimes of sins washed away from his spirit, be he not a chandala, a dog-eater.

What then, of me, who have borne you in my womb, who have watched you grow, seen your face every day, fed you at my breast? Surely, I am the most fortunate woman alive, perhaps one of the most fortunate through all the ages! And it is only today that I realise who you are, Kapila, who you really are, O God of gods."

She prostrated herself at his feet. "I, Devahuti, pay obeisance to you, my son, who are the highest Brahman, the supreme Purusha, who are the object of dhyana in Rishis' minds, withdrawn from the senses.

You are he who makes the torrent of the gunas run dry with your brilliance, you are the Lord Vishnu, who contain Brahma and the Vedas within him."

Kapila laid his hand on her head, blessing his mother. His voice choking with love, he said, "Mother, the path I have told you about is the easiest one of all. If you walk this way into your own soul, you will find the highest truth, even while you are in your body. You will attain to me, who am Un-born, eternal.

Those who do not walk the way of the spirit, return again and again to this samsara, this hell, this place of death and dying.

Look, mother, at who I am!"

With a touch of his hand, he showed a glimpse of the Light of lights, the final Sanctuary she must aspire to. Devahuti was momentarily lost to herself, to the world. She saw a crystal path at her feet, stretching away to the Light.

Now Kapila bowed solemnly to his mother. His mission in the world, to teach the Samkhya Shastra to her was over. He left his father Kardama's hermitage and walked towards the northwest.

Devahuti had seen the path she must follow to find moksha, and she set foot firmly on that mystic way.

Thrice daily she bathed in the cold Bindusaras, in the asrama at the head of the Saraswati. Her black hair became a tangled mass of tawny jata. From the severity of her penance (she hardly ate or drank anything anymore), her body became macilent, skin and bones. Yet, it was lustrous.

Kardama had created that asrama to be a wonder in the wilderness, during the time of their love. Even the Devas would have envied the luxuries and the elegance of that hermitage.

There were ivory couches, chased with gold, and silk cushions. The walls were crystal, with glowing emeralds embedded in them, and priceless statuettes of unworldly apsaras, dancing, made of precious jewels. Jewel lamps shone softly everywhere.

And, of course, the garden was a wonder upon the earth, a bit of heaven fallen into the mortal world, with its swimming tank full of the rarest lotuses, and its trees of wishes, shining parijatas, and its birds and the bees that drank from the flowers found nowhere else.

Surely, Indra's queens would have envied Devahuti's asrama. But when her son left, and she began her quest for the Atman, she abandoned her home, and never entered it.

At first, she was plunged in grief – she missed Kapila even more that she had Kardama, when her husband left her. At least then she had her son to raise, to turn to, to love; now all that raging love turned inwards, and initially it seared her spirit.

Day and night, she saw Kapila's face before her eyes shut in dhyana; she saw his smile, she heard his voice, and nothing else.

And thinking of Kapila, her son, ceaselessly, she thought in fact of Hari Narayana, the Lord, every moment. Her every thought, her every moment flowed towards him. He was enshrined in her heart.

Slowly, her mind grew calm as a lake on which no wind stirs anymore. She realised that Kapila was with her, that indeed he was nearer than he had been when he had lived with her in the asrama.

She found him within her meditating heart. Soon, the image of Kapila coalesced with the image of Vishnu. Now she saw just the Lord. She saw every part of him, she dwelt on him; she dwelt in him.

Devahuti did not stir; she hardly breathed anymore. The vidyadharis that her husband had once created for their time of love fed her body. Her clothes fell away from her, and she sat on naked, protected by the past karma, her daiva, her fate.

Her body, which she forgot as a man does his dreams when he awakens from them, was black with the dirt that covered it. She sat on like a flame covered with smoke.

Thus, she journeyed along the path her son had illumined for her, and she attained the Parabrahman. Vidura, the place where Devahuti attained nirvana, is called Siddhapada, and it is one of the holiest places in the three worlds.

When she was absorbed in the Brahman, her body — from which all the sins had been washed by her dhyana — flowed as a river upon the earth. The river Devahuti blessed men with many siddhis, and the siddhas of the forest and the mountains always love to bathe in it for the many boons it has to bestow.

Kapila travelled across the earth, and wherever he went, he was worshipped by siddhas, charanas, gandharvas, apsaras and rishis.

Finally, Varuna Deva received him on his shore, and worshipped him with padya and arghya. The Lord of the ocean then led Kapila down into his enchanted realm, and gave him a magnificent cave in which to sit in magical patala.

Kapila Vasudeva remains there, in dhyana, and his presence is a deep blessing upon the three worlds – for their peace and light in the darkest, most evil times.

And that, dear Kshatriya, is the legend of Kapila; and both he that narrates it, and the secret Samkhya Shastra that the Avatara taught, and he that listens to it with a pure heart, find the grace and the lotus feet of the Blue God, Mahavishnu, who lies upon Anantasesha, who bears the emblem of golden Garuda upon his banner, who is the Brahman.'

Maitreya smiled at Vidura, who sat motionless, utterly absorbed," said Vyasa's son, Suka Muni,'

Says Ugrasravas the Suta, Romaharshana's son, to Saunaka and his Rishis in the Naimisa aranya.

[illegible]

Skandha 4

SVAYAMBHUVA MANU'S DAUGHTERS

UGRASRAVAS CONTINUES HIS PURANA IN THE NAIMISA VANA:

'Suka said, "Maitreya resumed, 'Besides his sons Priyavrata and Uttanapada, Svyambhuva Manu had three daughters from his wife Satarupa. They were called Akuti, Devahuti and Prasuti.

Manu gave Akuti to Maharishi Ruchi, on the condition of Putrika dharma. Only a father who has no sons insists upon Putrika dharma: when he gives his daughter in marriage the condition is that he shall have the right to raise her firstborn son.

Ruchi sired twins from Akuti, a brilliant boy and a girl. The boy, who was named Yagna, was Vishnu himself in amsa. The girl was Sri Lakshmi, incarnate, and she was called Dakshina. Manu took Yagna and raised him, while Ruchi and Akuti raised Dakshina.

But these twins were Hari and his consort, and when they came of age, they married each other.

Yagna fathered twelve sons on Dakshina – Tosha, Pratosha, Santosha, Bhadra, Shanti, Idaspati, Idhma, Kavi, Vibhu, Svahna, Sudeva and Rochana.

It was the manvantara called Svayambhuva, after the Manu who ruled over it. Yagna and Dakshina's sons were the Devas of that manvantara. They were called Tushitas.

During the Svayambhuva manvantara, Marichi and his brothers were the Saptarishis, while Yagna himself was Indra. Priyavrata and Uttanapada were the Manuputras, of immense splendour and power, and Yagna was also Hari's Avatara.

These were the deities of that epoch. The Manuputras' sons and daughters ruled the manvantara.

As we have seen, Vidura, Manu gave his second daughter Devahuti to Kardama Prajapati, born from Brahma's shadow. His third daughter, Manu gave to Daksha Prajapati, who was also Brahma's son, born from his immaculate mind.

Kardama and Devahuti's son was Kapila Vasudeva, and they had nine daughters before he was born. Kala, the eldest, became the Rishi Marichi's wife. She bore him two splendid sons, Kashyapa and Purniman, whose progeny peopled the earth.

Purniman had two sons Viraja and Viswaga, and a daughter called Devakulya, who, in her next birth became the Devi Ganga.

Kardama and Devahuti's second daughter, Shraddha, became Angiras' wife, and the mother of Utathya, who was the Lord himself, and of the venerable Brihaspati.

Havirbhu became Pulastya's wife, and Agastya Muni was her son. Visravas was also Havirbhu's son; and by his wife Idavida, he became the father of Kubera, lord of treasures.

By his second wife, Kesini, he sired the Rakshasas Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Vibheeshana.

Pulaha Muni married Gati, who bore him three sons – Karmasreshta, Variyan and Sahishnu.

Devahuti's daughter Kriya was married to the Rishi Kratu, and their sons were the renowned cosmic Sages, no bigger than a man's thumb: sixty thousand of them known as the Valakhilyas.

Vasishta married Kardama's daughter Arundhati, and had seven sons – Chitraketu, Surochis, Virajas, Mitra, Ulbana, Vasubrihadyana and Dyumat. Vasishta Muni also had other sons, Shakti and his brothers, but by another wife.

Atharvan's wife Chitti (also called Shanti), had a most righteous son called Dadichi, or Aswasiras.

Kriya's sister, Khyati, became the wife of Bhrigu, and the mother of two sons, Dhatr and Vidhatr. Their daughter was Sri, who became Vishnu's eternal love.

The great Sage Meru gave his daughters Ayati and Niyati to be the wives of Bhrigu and Khyati's sons. Dhatr and Vidhatr fathered two sons, Mrikanda and Prana.

Mrikanda's son was the great Markandeya, master of the ancient lore, and Prana's son was Vedasiras.

Maharishi Bhrigu also had another son by Khyati. He was called Kavi, and he became the father of the immortal Usanas, who is better known as Sukra, or Sukracharya, Guru to the race of Asuras.

Manu's third daughter, Prasuti, became Daksha Prajapati's wife. She bore him sixteen daughters; thirteen became wives of Dharma Deva, one married Agni Deva, one the Pitrs, and one became Lord Siva's wife.

Dharma Deva's wives were Sraddha, Maitri, Daya, Shanti, Tushti, Pushti, Kriya, Unnati, Buddhi, Medha, Titiksha, Hri and Murti.

Sraddha gave birth to Shubha, Daya to Abhaya, Shanti to Sukha, Tushti to Mudh, Pushti to Smaya, Kriya to Yoga, Unnati to Darpa, Buddhi to Artha, Medha to Smriti, Titiksha to Kshema, and Hri had a son called Prasraya.

Murti, who was perhaps the most excellent of Dharma Deva's daughters, gave birth to the incomparable Sages Nara and Narayana.

When these two were born, the universe rejoiced. All the four quarters, winds, rivers, the ocean, great mountains and the minds of men were all suffused with a fine peace.

The sky resounded with gandharvas' horns. Rishis chanted the Vedas and offered fervent thanks. Kinnaras and gandharvas sang in delight, and apsaras danced.

The highest bliss swept the worlds. Brahma, the Devas and the loftiest Rishis came to witness the birth of Nara Narayana, the twin incarnation.

The Devas said, 'We salute the Purusha, who has been born in Dharma's house as Nara Narayana! They have come to reveal the true nature of the Atman. We ask for His blessing: who created us from the sattva guna, to be the guardians of the earth.'

The Devas prostrated before the twin Avatara. As soon as they had grown up, Nara and Narayana went away to Mount Gandhamadana, fragrant mountain, gatekeeper to the realm of the Gods.

They sat there in an unprecedented, awesome tapasya that blessed the earth for all time, all the yugas and kalpas, so evil would never rule the world entirely, not in her darkest hour.

Vidura, my son, it is the same Nara and Narayana who were born into this age of ours as Arjuna and Krishna.

Manu's daughter Anasuya became the Maharishi Atri's wife. Brahma told Atri to go forth and people the earth with children.

Atri and Anasuya came to the portion of the Vindhya mountain called Ruksha, to the source of the Narmada and the Sona, and he began an intense tapasya in the sylvan surrounding, covered with palasa and asoka trees.

All around him, waterfalls chimed where the river Nirvindhya fell down the blue grey mountain in silvery cascades. Atri stood on one leg, for a hundred years. He controlled his breath with pranayama. He was praying for a son.

Atri Mahamuni prayed, "I worship only Him who is the Lord of the world, the greatest God. Let him bless me with a son who is like Himself."

A hundred years went by, and Atri did not stir. The power of his pranayama issued from his head as spirit fire, and seared the higher realms of the devas. The Trimurti – Brahma, Vishnu and Siva – came to Atri's asrama.

Atri saw the Gods, of whom the gandharvas and apsaras sing praises, as do the devas, the siddhas, the nagas and the vidyadharas. He was dazzled; his hair stood on end.

He swayed forward on his one leg to greet them with folded hands. He prostrated himself at their feet like a stick, so emaciated was he.

He saw Brahma sat on his white Swan, Vishnu on his golden Eagle, and Siva was mounted on his Bull. They smiled radiantly at him. So bright were they, that he could not look at them for long, but had to shut his eyes.

When he could somewhat control his pounding heart, Atri murmured, "I worship you, O Trimurti, who create, sustain and destroy the universe. I am thrice blessed that you have come to my asrama.

Yet, my Lords, I prayed only to one of you, the greatest among you, to bless me with a son in his image. Now three of you have appeared, and I am confused.

Tell me, which one of you will give me a son? Which one, Lords, is the greatest?"

The Three laughed softly. They replied in one voice, "Brahmana, you wanted a son who is an image of the Lord of the world, the greatest God. We did not want to disappoint you.

Atri, the three of us together comprise that God, the Parabrahman. There is no difference, save in appearances between us three. We are one, and we are He that you worshipped for a son."

Atri still looked mildly bewildered. "But which one of you will give me a son?'

The Trimurti replied, "You shall have three sons, Muni, each will be an amsa of one of us. They will be celebrated across the three worlds, and bring you immortal fame."

The Three melted away, and Atri and Anasuya were left enthralled, staring, scarcely able to believe their fortune.

Three sons were sons to Anasuya and Atri – Soma, the Moon, was an amsavatara of Brahma; Datta, master of Yoga, was Vishnu's amsa; and the great Durvasa, was Siva's.

As you know, O Kuru, Agni Deva married the Devi Svaha. She gave him three sons, Pavaka, Pavamana, and Shuchi. These three gods watch over sacrifices to Agni, and they live on the burnt offerings made to the Fire God.

In turn, they gave birth to forty-five fires. These forty-five, their three fathers, and their grandfather Agni Deva, make forty-nine Fire gods. In their names, the ishtis, the small yagnas called agneyas, are performed by those who know the Vedas well.

The Manes or the Pitrs are of four kinds – Agnisattvas, those who became ancestors by following only the smara rituals; Barhishads, those who became manes after performing agnihotra and Vedic yagnas; Saumyas, or Somapas, those who drank Soma rasa during the sacrifices, and became Pitrs; and finally, Vajpayas, those who drank ghee during the yagas.

Daksha's daughter, Svadha, became their wife. She bore them two daughters, Vayuna and Dharini, both of whom became fine exponents of the Shastras.

Daksha's daughter Sati, who was the Goddess Kali incarnate, he gave to the Lord Siva. But then, enmity arose between Daksha Prajapati and his son-in-law, and it ended in a great tragedy,' said Maitreya.

DAKSHA AND SIVA

VIDURA ASKED, 'BUT HOW COULD ANYONE MAKE AN ENEMY OF THE Lord Siva, the Mahayogin, the most serene God, who is always absorbed in dhyana?'

Maitreya said, 'Once, Marichi and the other Devarishis undertook a great sacrifice called Brahma Sattra. All the Rishis, the Devas, all the divine beings of heaven and earth attended the yagna.

When Daksha Prajapati entered the yagnashala, he was so illustrious, so radiant, sunlike, that the rest of the august gathering rose as a man, and paid him tribute. But two of those present did not rise, when Daksha entered – Brahma and Siva.

Daksha strode up to his father Brahma, prostrated himself at the Creator's feet, and took his blessing. Then, he was shown to his appointed place, where he sat down.

Now he saw that Siva was already present, and had not risen to honour his father-in-law. Daksha was furious.

His eyes turned the colour of copper, and he hissed, "All the Brahmarishis are here, and this upstart has insulted me before them all! He begged me for my daughter's hand, and I gave her to him.

But he shows me none of the reverence due to a father-in-law. I should have the position of a Guru, but this fool does not even get up when I enter. He is arrogant, and I regret having given my daughter to him."

As he went on, he grew angrier and angrier. Soon, he could not control himself, and raged, "He is shameless, this idiot with a monkey's eyes. O, giving him my Sati was like teaching an imbecile sudra the Vedas, when he cannot pronounce the holy verses.

We know about this man. Surrounded by bhutas, pretas and pisachas, his hair wild, matted in jata, his body covered by ashes from the dead, wearing human bones and skulls as a garland, he wanders naked in burning ghats like a king of ghosts and goblins.

At times, he laughs for no apparent reason, like a madman, then sobs. He calls himself Siva, the auspicious one, but he is ashiva, the opposite of auspicious. He is always drunk or out of his wits on the ganja he smokes.

Yes, he is a king, but a king of pramathas, evil spirits, and an embodiment of tamas.

Oh, my father Brahma insisted that I give my precious Sati to him, and against my reason and my will, I agreed. How I rue that mistake today! How I regret having given my pure child to this master of goblins, this vile, mad fellow, this unmada."

Not a word did Siva speak, and a small smile played on his lips all the while that Daksha raged. Daksha sprang up, took some holy water in his palm, sipped it in achamana, and cried at Siva:

"Siva, I will curse you!"

The others, all great ones, rose in alarm, and tried to restrain Daksha. But he was beside himself, and past listening to them. Daksha cursed Siva.

"From now on, when Indra, Upendra and the other gods receive the havis from any yagna, you shall get nothing!"

And the Prajapati stormed out of that yagnashala, where a shocked silence fell. Daksha returned to his home. But Nandiswara heard about the curse, and his eyes turned red as plums. He, in turn, cursed Daksha.

"Only a great fool thinks so much of himself that he forgets who the Lord Siva is! Daksha remembers the niceties of decorum too well, and forgets the Truth: that Siva is the Parabrahman. Such a fool shall lose Siva's grace, and become no better than an animal that lives only to satisfy its hunger and thirst.

Why, this brahmana Daksha, this son of Brahma, is as witless as a goat. So let him soon wear a goat's head. And you Rishis and brahmanas, who stood silent while the fool cursed Siva, all of you shall suffer for the crime committed here today.

Brahmanas, the time will come when you adhere blindly, witlessly, to the ritual of the Veda, to its honeyed songs, but you will have forgotten the inner truths of the sanatana dharma.

The time will come when you will be winebibbers, gluttons and debauches, living just to satisfy your basest appetites; why the time will come, Brahmanas, when you will live by begging alms! And you will be so greedy and so full of darkness, that you will eat anything at all, however impure.

Your only love for gyana, tapasya and the holy vratas will be to deceive the world to have your livelihood. For your only true attachments shall be to gold and property, to lust and greed.

You will chant the Veda, but know nothing of its inner meaning. Your rituals will be like a body from which the spirit has long gone, lifeless, empty, and of no real value to anyone."

Bhrigu sprang to his feet, and cried in retort, "I curse those who follow Siva to be enemies of the true Shastras! They shall be called pasandhis, hypocrites.

They will wear matted jata like Siva, bones for ornaments, cover their bodies with ash from the burning ghats, be drunk on sura, wine, and be outcasts from the four varnas.

Nandin denounces the way of the Vedas, the way of the brahmanas, which has been the only true path in this world, the path of the manes. So the followers of Siva shall be heretics, unclean and shunned by decent men everywhere, who worship Vishnu, the Lord of Gods.

They will have their own cult, based on their Lord, the Smasanilaya, the Sarvaripati, the dweller in cemeteries, the Lord of the night, Lord of goblins, and it shall be the left hand way.

They shall all be possessed and ruled by the tamoguna."

As Bhrigu raged, Siva rose, and, without a word, but with a sad look on his face, left the yagnashala with his ganas.

The Brahma Sattra was duly completed, after the thousand years set apart for it.

The sacrificers, all those great and holy ones, came to the Sangama, where the Ganga and the Yamuna meet, and bathed in the holy waters there, in the avabhrita snana.

Then, purified, they returned to their asramas and their spirit realms.'

ON KAILASA

MANY YEARS PASSED AFTER THE BRAHMA SATTRA. THE ENMITY BETWEEN Siva and Daksha simmered, at least in the Prajapati's heart.

Brahma crowned his son Daksha king of all the Prajapatis, the lords of creation. Daksha's hubris grew. He performed a Vajapeya yagna, to which he did not call Siva.

Then, as the Srutis enjoin, it was time for him to undertake a greater, grander sacrifice still – a Brihaspati Sava.

Daksha invited all the Devas and Rishis to his yagna. The Pitrs were asked to attend. Everyone of any note in the three worlds was invited to Daksha's mahayagna, but he did not call Siva or Sati.

All the great arrived at Gangadvara, where Daksha was performing his yagna; they came with their wives and families, turned out in their finery, and wearing their best ornaments. Daksha received them all with honour.

Meanwhile, on Kailasa, Sati heard about her father's yagna. She saw hosts of divine beings passing above, in vimanas, some brilliant Rishis flying by themselves.

She saw gandharvas, kinnaras, vidyadharas, yakshas with rolling eyes, wearing the finest silks, with priceless padakas around their throats, burnished earrings, all flying like bright comets towards Daksha's satra.

She saw them flying from every direction towards the sacred ground her father had chosen for his yagnashala.

Sati went to Siva, and said, "My father is performing a great yagna. All the Rishis and Devas, the gandharvas and apsaras are going there. Let us also go to the sacrifice, Siva. I want to see my mother, my sisters, my brothers and the rest of my family, whom I have not seen for so many years.

Oh Siva, you are the master of the universe, and for you the yagna means little. But for me, this is a great occasion for me, and being a woman, I am eager to go to my father's sacrifice.

Look at the sky full of glittering vimanas; this is the event of the age, my Lord. I don't want to miss it, not for the world!"

She saw the look on his face, and said, "I know what you want to say – that we have not been invited to the sattra. But, Satikantha, a father doesn't have to invite his own daughter, or her husband to his yagna.

I beg you, Siva, take me to Gangadvara to my father's sacrifice. Lord, make me happy!"

But Siva had not forgotten what Daksha said to him at the Brahma Sattra; he had not forgotten how Sati's father had cursed him.

Smiling tolerantly, Siva said, "What you say about fathers and their daughters is mainly true. But when the father is as arrogant and vain as Daksha is, he is likely to humiliate us if we go uninvited to his yagna.

My love, he has not invited us because he does not want us there; at least he does not want me there. Surely, he is wealthy and learned, illustrious and a Prajapati.

He is Brahma's own son, and there is no lineage superior to his. But he has become arrogant because of who he is. He thinks of himself as being a great and learned man; he thinks there is no one like him in the three worlds.

He thinks he is the greatest man alive, the greatest tapasvin. There are many kinds of pride, Sati, but the pride of being learned and wise is the worst of them. This vanity holds Daksha in its coils, and lays waste all his other undeniable qualities.

I will never go to a house were I know I am not welcome, where my host does not want me, and where he will look upon my going with displeasure.

Sati, one is not wounded as fiercely by enemies' arrows in battle as one is by a relative's sharp words. The wounds from arrows heal in time, but never the injuries to the heart from harsh words.

I know you are your father's favourite daughter, and he loves you more than all his other children. But, my love, he hates me. He imagines I insulted him at the Brahma Sattra, because I did not rise to greet him.

But a true greeting, a pratyudgamanam or abhivadanam, is not to the ego or the body, but to the Purusha within. Besides, I could not bow to him as my superior. That would have been a sin for which Daksha would have to pay: for, though he is my father-in-law, he is neither my Guru nor my superior.

Your father cursed me, do you remember? He denied me my share of the havis from any yagna. He cursed me and my ganas to be heretics and outcasts from the Vedic way.

No, Sati, I will not go to your father's yagna; he is my enemy, and all his followers are my enemies.

You are so pure, and your heart is like a flower. I do not want you to go to Daksha's yagna, either; I fear that he will hurt you out of his arrogance and his hatred for me."

He paused, and read clearly in her face the thoughts that passed through her mind.

With a sigh, he said, "Sati, you are not Daksha's daughter anymore, but my wife. You will not be welcome at your father's sacrifice. Your mind is noble, and if Daksha insults you, you will die. I do not want you to go there."

He, who had never denied her anything she asked for, was now firm. But Sati's heart was set on going to her father's yagna; she longed to see her mother and her sisters, her other relatives and her old friends.

She was torn in two, between loyalty to Siva, and her womanly desire to attend the sacrifice. She was piqued that her husband would not allow her such a small indulgence. Her eyes filled with tears and she cast angry looks at him.

Sati walked out of Siva's cave, set out for her father's house, then, growing afraid of what Siva would think and say, she turned back again. Siva watched her, not saying a word.

This she did several times, but finally, her womanliness prevailed. With many a sigh and toss of her lovely head, Sati walked away from Kailasa, and without looking back, made for Daksha's home, and his Brihaspati Sava.

Siva's ganas followed Sati: great Yakshas like Maniman, Mada and the rest, led by Nandiswara himself. The ganas made her sit upon the black bull, Nandin, and went along quite merrily.

Only Siva saw clearly into the future, and the tragedy it held. He sat alone in his cave, sadly.

Sarikas, songbirds, went with Sati. Her sakhis went with her, bringing mirrors and dice-boards, lotuses, the white parasol, lotuses, betel leaves, cowrie shells, and garlands, the emblems of her royalty.

Musicians travelled with Sati, beating on drums, playing on flutes and blowing on conches. She went forth grandly, and arrived at Gangadvara, at her father's splendid yagnashala.

Vedic mantras resounded from the sacrificial arena, where the most profound Rishis and the Devas themselves attended Daksha's Sattra, and the other divine beings, the siddhas, charanas, gandharvas, apsaras, and the others. It was truly a magnificent occasion, and the yagnashala shone like heaven.

There were hills of the rarest and most delicious foodstuffs piled on every side, in golden, silver, clay and wooden vessels. Darbha grass was spread everywhere, and deerskins and other hides; the sacrifice was well underway when Sati arrived.

But from fear of Daksha, none of the Rishis or the Devas greeted Sati. Only her mother and her sisters ran to her with glad cries, and clasped her in their arms, kissing her, and crying. They were bursting with a hundred questions, each.

Daksha looked at his daughter, and looked away as if he did not see her, or as if she did not exist. Her mother and aunts tried to make light of the searing insult; they offered her a place of honour to sit in, and chattered of other things: how she was, and how well she looked. Her sisters could not stop hugging and kissing her.

But Sati ignored them now. She looked around her and saw that not only had he not been invited, Siva had no worship at this yagna; he would be offered none of the burnt havis. Her eyes burned, and in a moment, she was the awesome Goddess Durga, whose incarnation she was.

Smouldering, she walked straight up to Daksha. With a thought, she restrained the ganas who had come with her, Nandin and the rest, who were ready to raze Daksha's sacrifice because he had insulted their mistress, and because their Lord Siva had not been worshipped at that yagna.

Her voice quivering with rage, she said to her father, "Who but you would insult Siva, who has no enemies? O jealous, petty Daksha, you are so full of vanity that you cannot see the truth anymore.

Ah, you hate Siva, whose very name destroys the sins of a hundred lives. You find your dignity in hating the Lord of the universe. You say my husband is asiva; then how do Brahma and Vishnu wear the flowers that fall from his feet on their heads?"

Her eyes were red, she stammered in anger; she was like a terrible flame, pure and smokeless. It seemed she would burn up not only her father's yagna but the entire world with her wrath.

"What a fool you are, that you make an enemy of the master of the universe.

There are three kinds of men, the lowest being the asadhu. He sees only the faults in other men, and no good at all. The second kind of man sees both the faults and the good.

But the best man, the sadhu, magnifies the good in other men, and hardly sees their flaws at all. This is because he sees God dwelling in them; he sees the immortal soul in every man.

But you, my father, ah my tongue burns to call you that, are lower than the lowest. You see faults, and only faults, in One who has no fault, in Siva who is perfect. Siva is above hating you for what you have said to him, for cursing him.

But not I; I cannot bear it. My husband is the Auspicious One; he is, indeed, Siva. It is you, vile Daksha, who are asiva, and that is why you hate my Lord."

She paused, her breast heaving. Utter silence had fallen on the glittering yagnashala.

Sati drew a breath and continued, "I was taught that a bhakta should never countenance his God being insulted, but cut out the tongue of the one who commits the blasphemy.

The real bhakta will lay down his life, rather than listen to his God being disparaged. If he is too weak to avenge his lord, he should not listen to the blasphemy, but shut his ears and leave. This is true dharma.

Alas for me, I have been born from a wretch who hates Siva, who curses him. Siva warned me not to come to this yagna, but I did not listen to him. I must pay for that sin, and for the sin of being Dakshayani, Daksha's daughter.

I do not want this body of mine, Daksha, born from your hateful seed. Look, I cast it away. I shall be born again of a father I can respect, and one who loves my lord. Then, I will be Siva's again, forever."

Wrapping her golden garment tightly around herself, Sati sat on the ground. She sipped holy water in achamana, and shut her eyes in dhyana. Her body still and steady, she restrained her breath with pranayama. She controlled prana and apana at her navel, in the manipura chakra.

Slowly, she raised the vital air called udana from that mystic plexus into her heart, and up through her throat, to the ajna chakra in her forehead, between her eyebrows.

Sati invoked Vayu and Agni in her velvet body, which Siva had made love to so many times. She thought of him now; he filled her mind, her being. Nothing else existed but Siva.

A flash fire broke out among her exquisite limbs, a fire from within, a fire of agneyi. In a moment, it consumed her.

A roar of grief echoed through heaven and earth. Sati's ganas drew their weapons and rushed at Daksha.

Chanting mantras from the Yajur Veda, the Rishi Bhrigu quickly poured secret oblations onto the yagna fire, and invoked the dakshinagni, to quell the desecrators of the sacrifice.

Thousand of fierce brahmana spirits called Ribhus rose in a gale from the fire. They had drunk the soma rasa, and were armed with brands of occult fire. They flew roaring at the Siva's pramathas and guhyakas, and killed many of them, while the others fled back to their Lord in his cave on Mount Kailasa.

THE RAZING OF DAKSHA'S YAGNA

MEANWHILE, NARADA FLEW TO KAILASA BY RISHI PATHA, THE SKYWAY of the Sages.

He stood trembling before Siva, who opened his eyes from dhyana and asked, "What is it, Muni? You look unwell. What happened?"

Sobbing, Narada told him what had happened at Daksha's yagna. Siva grew awfully still. The only sign of his rage was that his lips twitched, and his eyes had turned the colour of blood.

Without a word, he pulled a strand of jata from his head, a strand of matted dreadlocks. With a terrible howl, Siva sprang to his feet, and dashed that jata against the ground like lightning.

There was a clap of thunder, a blinding flash of light, and a great and dreadful Form stood forth. Virabhadra's head scraped the sky; he had a thousand arms, each hand carried an awesome weapon.

His skin was the hue of a thundercloud, and his three eyes blazed like suns. His hair was flames; his fangs were like streaks of lightning. He wore a garland of skulls, and stood with folded hands before Siva.

He said in a voice like the thunder of the pralaya, "Command me, Lord."

Siva replied, "Go to Daksha's yagna. Take my army of ganas with you. Kill Daksha, destroy his sacrifice."

Virabhadra made a pradakshina around Siva. With that, he felt he could defeat even an army of Devas and Rishis. A trident in his hand, followed by Siva's ganas, Virabhadra flew towards Gangadvara.

At the yagna, which continued even after Sati killed herself, they saw a great cloud of dust in the northern sky, a cloud sweeping towards them, a cloud that soon blotted out the sun, so the stars appeared.

The Devas, the Rishis, their wives, all the gandharvas, apsaras, siddhas, charanas, kinnaras, vidyadharas and the rest trembled suddenly as unaccountable terror lanced through them.

They cried in panic, "Hah! What darkness is this? Not a breath of air stirs, yet this pall of dust blows towards us like a hurricane! This is no herd of cattle. It is no band of brigands, since Prachinabarhis still rules the earth. Is this the pralaya, for such fear is upon us."

Daksha's wife Prasuti was the most distraught. She sobbed, "This is punishment coming to us for what my husband did to his daughter.

How could Daksha imagine that he would not have to pay for his sins against Siva? Even Brahma cannot stand against Siva's wrath.

Why, Siva is he who consumes the galaxies when the time of dissolution comes. My husband was so foolish to provoke him. Now we shall all pay dearly!"

A thousand omens appeared all around that yagnashala, on earth and in the sky, proclaiming disaster. In moments, with terrific howls and roars, Siva's army of ganas arrived. They came flying, on the ground and through the sky, a dreadful host.

Some smashed the great pragvamsha beam that rested on the eastern and western pillars of the yagnashala; others tore down Prasuti's royal apartment; others razed the glittering sabha in front of the yagnashala; others set fire to the store-rooms in which the grain and provisions for the yagna were kept.

Some ganas and pramathas ruined Daksha's apartment, and the kitchen; some flattened the vast cooking vessels being used to feed a thousand august guests; others extinguished the sacrificial fire by urinating on it all together.

The wild ganas slapped the Rishis; they molested the holy ones' wives. The Devas tried to flee, but they were caught and soundly beaten.

It seemed they had broken dharma by coming to Daksha's arrogant yagna, and staying on after Sati immolated herself. They Gods were weak in all their lustrous limbs; they made easy prey for the rampaging Sivaganas.

Panic reigned. Virabhadra swooped on Daksha, and held him fast in his immense arms.

While pouring oblations onto the sacred fire, ladle in hand, Bhrigu had stroked his moustache in approval at the Brahma Sattra, when Daksha cursed Siva. Now the great Sivagana Maniman caught him, held him down, and pulled out those moustaches, hair by hair.

Bhaga had encouraged Daksha with his eyes, probably winking, when he ignored Sati when she entered his yagna. Now Nandiswara caught Bhaga, and gouged his eyes out.

Pusan had laughed aloud when Daksha offended Siva long ago, at the Brahma Sattra. Now Chandikeswara knocked out Pusan's teeth with a blow of his fist.

Three-eyed Virabhadra flung Daksha down on the ground, sat on his chest, and tried to cut off his head with a sword. But no weapon made any impression on Daksha's throat. Why, no astra the gana invoked made any impression Daksha's neck.

Virabhadra lapsed into thought for a moment. Then he strangled the Prajapati with his hands. When Daksha was dead, he ripped off his head with his nails, and flung it into the dakshinagni, from which Bhrigu had summoned the ribhus.

Yells of triumph erupted from the host of bhutas, pretas, pisachas and pramathas that had come with Virabhadra, and now ran amok in Daksha's yagnashala, among the food and drink, among the women.

Wails, howls and screams filled the air from those who had been with Daksha.

Having killed Daksha, Virabhadra set fire to the brilliant yagnashala, watched it burn down, and flew back to Kailasa, home of guhyakas, to report the resounding success of his mission to his master, the blue-throated Lord Nilakanta in his cave.

THE MERCY OF SIVA

THE DEVAS AND RISHIS, THOSE THAT SURVIVED VIRABHADRA'S slaughter, fled to Brahma, who had not come to his son's yagna. Neither had Vishnu. All bloody, and many with severed limbs and deep wounds on their fine bodies, they came trembling before the Creator, and told him everything that had chanced at Daksha's Brihaspati Sava.

Brahma said, "Daksha was my son, but he performed his yagna just to slight Mahadeva. But a sacrifice, once begun but not completed, will prove to be a dreadful curse. You have offended not just any God, but Siva himself, fathomless Siva.

Sati killed herself at Daksha's yagna, and you stayed on at that sacrifice. Siva is in torment, and his grief has already turned to wrath. My sons, if you do not go at once to Kailasa and beg Siva's forgiveness, he will destroy creation.

Not I, or Yagna here, nor any of you Rishis know Siva. He is the Brahman, the first of all the Gods. If you don't seek his mercy quickly, prepare for all the stars to be put out, prepare yourselves to die."

Yagna Deva, who was the Indra of that kalpa, said, "Pitama, you also come with us, for we are afraid to face Siva."

Brahma murmured, "Who can tell how Sankara can be pacified now?" But he set out with the Devas, the Prajapatis and the Rishis from Satyaloka, where he dwells.

Quick as time, they arrived on Earth, on the lone mountain, north of the Himalaya, which shone like a great pearl set in an austere, breathtaking landscape. Kailasa is the home of the greatest siddhas and yogis.

Kinnaras, gandharvas, apsaras and other divine beings inhabit its lustrous slopes in great numbers, because, truly, this is the holiest of all mountains. Its summits are rich with an extravagance of precious jewels, and some of the most brilliant and valuable ores.

Kalpa-vrikshas, trees of wishes, whose fruit shine like gems, grew in luminous groves on the sacred mountain. Siddha women, exquisite oreads, come to the bright caves of Kailasa to make love with their men.

Crystal streams and lakes embellish the lonely mountain, their water so clear and sweet that they are like amrita. Peacocks call here, and swarms of drunken bees feast on the nectar from flowers that grow here, in colours never seen in any other place on earth.

The trees that grow on Kailasa are the ancestors of all the trees of the earth. Mandara and parijata abound, sarala, tamala, sala, tala, kovidara, asana, arjuna, kadamba, nipa, naga, punnaga, champaka, patala, ashoka, bakula, kunda, kurbaka, and others for which there are no names in the tongues of men.

They grow here in their pristine strains, incredibly massive and lofty, and their flowers and fruit unearthly.

Upon the shimmering lakes, an abundance of kalaharas floats; and among all the other brilliant lotuses, are the golden flowers of a hundred petals. Malathi and jasmine grow on Kailasa, kubja, madhavi, and fruit-trees: panasa, audubara, aswattha, plaksha, nyagrodha, hingu, and bhurja. The betel tree grows here, the jambu vine, cardamom, all at different levels of the mountain.

Wild life of every kind teems upon the magic mountain: deer, monkey troupes, boar, lion, bear, the gavaya oxen, tiger, bison, and yes, the eight-footed sarabhas, the one-legged karnatara, unicorn, centaur and faun, silver wolf, golden deer and other enchanted spirits and beasts.

The birds of Kailasa are even more exotic and various, and their songs sweeter that those of any other birds of any of the three realms.

The Nanda flowed past Kailasa, her waters purer because Sati had bathed in them. Across from Siva's mountain was the enchanted city Alaka, where Kubera ruled. The Alakananda flowed out from that city, too – the two rivers that washed Vishnu's holy feet.

These are the rivers in which the apsaras of heaven come to bathe and make love in. They come with their lovers and their friends in their fine vimanas. The rivers are tinted yellow and fragrant with the scent of saffron, washed from the breasts of these nymphs, and elephants come to drink from them. They bring their mates and make them drink too.

Wondrous Alaka, city of the king of the yakshas and guhyakas, lord of the Nine Treasures, one of the Lokapalas, the masters of the earth, fairly swarms with vimanas, which look like immense flying jewels, cut like faceted disks, which fly more quickly than light or time.

Charmed, magical Alaka where the dusky, exquisite yaksha women live, looks like a deep turquoise sky of clouds, lit by flashes on lightning – the gold from the palaces of Alaka and its sky-chariots.

Here the legendary saugandhika grows, in a vast forest, and swathes everything for yojanas in its ineffable scent. There are groves of precious harichandana trees here, against which great tuskers rub themselves.

There are lucid tanks, clear as Rishis' hearts, with steps leading down to them, made of vaidurya slabs; kimpurushas and their mates bathe in these; royal swans float on them.

Brahma and the Devas saw Alaka, like a great, mysterious jewel upon the earth; they saw the saugandhika vana, and they saw a banyan tree growing near the mystic forest. It was a tree like no other.

It was a hundred yojanas tall, and its branches and aerial roots stretched for seventy-five yojanas on every side. It was a forest by itself. So sacred was that tree that no bird built its nest in those copious branches, and the sun never penetrated the vast canopy.

Under that tree, which induced the deepest dhyana, Brahma and the Devas saw Siva. Siva sat like Yama, so still was he, and his anger seemed to have left him. His friend Kubera, master of rakshasas and guhyakas, sat near Siva, as did Sananda and other great Munis.

Siva's body shone like the golden clouds of sunset. He wore a deerskin, ashes all over his body, his hair in thick jata. He kept a club near him, and the crescent moon in his hair.

Siva sat upon a bed of darbha grass, and he was telling Narada, gently, about the nature of the eternal Brahman; and the others listened raptly. He sat in virasana, with his left foot high upon his right thigh, and his left hand resting on his right knee. His hand made the tarka mudra, its thumb and forefinger were joined, and the other fingers stretched out. He wore a yoga kaksha, a strap that held his left leg firm, he the Mahayogin, greatest of all tapasvins.

The Devas, the Rishis and Brahma bowed deeply to the Lord of mountains. Seeing Brahma, Siva rose and bowed to the four-faced Creator, even as Vishnu did to Kashyapa, when the Blue God came as the Dwarf Vamana. All the siddhas and Rishis, Kubera and the others, who sat around Siva, did as he did.

Smiling, Brahma said to Siva, "You are the Lord of this universe. You are the same Brahman that causes Siva and Shakti, Purusha and Prakriti. You are the immortal Seed and the Womb into which it is cast! As the spider does his cobweb, Lord, you create, protect and destroy all these worlds.

You created Yagna, the sacrifice, and made Daksha lord of yagnas to preserve the Vedas, which bestow dharma and artha. Auspicious One, you give good men swarga and moksha, and punish evil ones with naraka. But most of all, you are merciful.

You cannot let anger overwhelm you, as other men do, or the stars and the skies in which they burn will both be put out, and all of us: Gods and their creatures.

I beg you, Siva, show my foolish son mercy, be merciful towards the Devas and Rishis whom Virabhadra and your ganas killed or dismembered at Daksha's sacrifice, where you were not worshipped.

You are beyond maya, Mahadeva; you are omniscient. Let your wrath end here. Restore Daksha and the others to life; let the wounded be healed. Let Bhaga have his eyes back, Bhrigu his beard and moustaches, and Pusan his teeth.

Let Daksha's yagna be completed, and let whatever remains of it belong to you. Let the sacrifice be a Siva yagna, and all the havis be offered just to you!"

There was a moment's fathomless silence, and the Devas and Rishis trembled. Then, Siva began to laugh.

He said, "Lord of Creation, I am not angry anymore. Daksha and his followers were deluded by maya. I punished Daksha because he needed to be exorcised of his vanity. The others were punished incidentally.

Let what Nandin said come true.

Let Daksha be given the head of a ram, and let him live again. Let Bhaga see his share of the havis from any yagna with Mitra Deva's eyes. Let Pusan, who eats flour, eat it only with the sacrificer's teeth.

Let the Devas, who have offered me the remains of the havis, have all their limbs restored. Let the priests that lost their arms have use of the Aswini twins' arms. Let the Rishis who lost their hands have use of Pusan's hands. Bhrigu shall have the beard and moustaches of a ram."

When Brahma and the Devas heard all this, they stopped shaking and were gratified. Brahma said, "Lord, now come with us to the yagnashala, and see the sacrifice being completed."

There, at the yagnashala at Gangadvara, a goat's head was joined to Daksha's neck, and Siva gave him life again with just a look. The Prajapati rose as if from a deep sleep, and saw Siva before him. Like a forest pool, whose water becomes clear in autumn, Daksha looked at Siva, whom he had hated once, and felt only a great love in his heart for the God.

He was overwhelmed by love, and felt moved to sing Siva's praises, but suddenly he remembered what had happened to Sati, and his voice choked and tears streamed down Daksha's face.

Finally, he stopped sobbing, and, with folded hands, the Prajapati said humbly, "Lord, you have forgiven me! Though I insulted you and cursed you in my wretched vanity, you have given me back my life. I have no words to praise you with, O Siva, I have no way in which to repay my debt to you."

Siva smiled, and said, "Let your yagna be completed, Daksha."

Now Vishnu appeared there, illumining the quarters. He came mounted on golden Garuda, whose wings are the Sama hymns, the Brihad and the

Rathantara. His skin was deep blue, his robe was golden, and he wore a crown as bright as the sun.

The Devi Lakshmi leaned against his breast. The great Gods greeted one another, and all the others bowed to them, the three manifestations of the Brahman, the three who create, nurture and destroy the universe.

Now Daksha found his voice and, it seemed, his heart again. He began to sing the praises of the Gods before him, and especially Siva's praises.

"Lord you are the Brahman, you are beyond maya, you are peerless, with no one like you!"

The ritviks said contritely, "Siva, because of Nandiswara's curse, we grew attached to the ritual of the Veda, and forgot who you really are."

The udgatrs said, "We mistook the body for the soul, O Bhava, because we are so tired walking this terrible, shelterless path through samsara. Lord, give us refuge at your feet."

Bhrigu said, "Even Brahma is deluded by maya. The Devas sleep in the night of ignorance. None of us know your real nature, who abide in our hearts, O Antaryamin. Lord be gracious to me, so I never stray again!"

Brahma said, "What men perceive with their senses is not real. You, Lord, are the font of the senses and their objects, you are the wellspring of all Gods and beings."

Indra said, "Yet, this form of yours that we see is also real, God of gods."

The Rishis' wives said, "Lord, we beg you, let Daksha's yagna be completed."

The Rishis now eulogised Vishnu, "Achyuta, all the worlds worship Sri Lakshmi, the Devi of Fortune. She waits upon you, and you care little for prosperity."

The siddhas said, "Our minds are like an elephant, burnt by the forest fire of samsara, seared by the relentless thirst of the senses. Yet, when the creature bathes in the river of your legends, Hari, it forgets all about its torments, and that it ever experienced them."

Daksha's wife said to Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, "Lords, this yagna was like a man without his head, until you came to grace it."

The Lokapalas said, "Do we truly see you with our eyes? Or only with the eyes of our souls. Ah, blessed are they who see you as their own selves!"

The Yogeswaras, the lords of yoga said, "Highest are they who see you as the Brahman, and themselves as part of you. But, Lords, be merciful to those that worship you with bhakti."

Brahma said to Siva and to Vishnu, "I bow to you, whose natures I cannot fathom!"

Agni said, "Kindled by your light, my flames bear the burnt offerings of the yagna to all the Gods. But you are sacrifice incarnate, who are worshipped by the five hymns of the Yajurveda!"

The Devas said, "You withdraw the universe into yourself when the kalpa ends, who lie upon the Serpent on the infinite waters of the pralaya. We see you with our eyes today, whom the siddhas seek in the depth of their hearts."

The gandharvas sang, "All the Gods and all the worlds are just a small part of a part of you!"

The vidyadharas said, "Only he who drinks the amrita of your legends frees himself from the delusion of his body being his soul."

The brahmanas said, "You are the sacrifice, you are the offering; you are the fire, you are the mantra. You are the fuel, the darbha grass and the sacred vessels. You are the sadasya and the ritvik. You are the sacrificer and his wife. You are the agnihotra, Svaha, Svadha, the Soma rasa and the yagnapashu.

Your body is the three Vedas. Bless us, Lord of yagnas. Let us complete our sacrifice."

The three great Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva raised their hands in blessing over the yagna. Daksha lit the sacred fire again, and the sacrifice was duly completed. Now, it was thrice blessed because the Trimurti were present, and the grace of Daksha's great yagna still lingers upon the earth.

At the end of the yagna, Daksha, whose arrogance had quite left him, offered the first havis to Siva. The greatest Prajapati, goat-headed now, then performed the udavasana, the final rite. Having given their share of the offerings to all the gods to whom these were due, the drinkers of the Soma rasa, Daksha went to the river for the avabhrita snana, the bath with which the yagna is concluded.

Daksha attained many mystic powers from his yagna, and after blessing him, the Gods returned to their heavens. Siva went home to Kailasa, and now grief overwhelmed him. He suffered as only a great God can, until Sati was born again as the daughter of the mountain king, Himavan, and his wife Mena.

Now she was called Uma or Parvati, and Siva married her again, this time forever.'

Maitreya paused, then said, 'Vidura, Krishna's cousin Uddhava told me this tale. And he first heard it from his Guru Brihaspati. It is a sacred legend, O Kuru, and hearing it destroys the sins of many lives.

Siva married Parvati, and made love to her for a hundred years of the Devas. Then, he spent his hiranyaretas, his golden seed, outside her body, into the sky! The river Ganga bore that blazing seed for a while, but she could not stand it.

She washed it into a bank of sara reeds, and there a brilliant son was born to Siva, a boy whose lustre lit earth and sky like another sun. Six stellar Goddesses, the Krittikas, adopted the marvellous child and he grew six heads to feed from them all simultaneously. They took him to their home in the Pleiades, and raised him as their own. He was called Karttikeya, for being their foster son.

But finally, he returned to Siva and Uma on earth. Those were the days when a great Asura called Taraka tyrannised the earth. He had a boon from Brahma that he could be killed only by a son born to Siva the Yogin. He got this boon with an awesome tapasya, after Sati died and before Parvati was born. The Demon believed himself immortal.

Then, the Devas discovered Karttikeya hidden away among the distant stars. Siva and Parvati sent Virabhadra and Nandiswara to fetch their son home. Karttikeya was made Senapati of the Devas' army, and he killed Tarakasura with a spear of agni.

Karttikeya is also called Shanmukha (six-faced), Muruga, Subrahmanya, Guha, Kumara, Skanda and a hundred other names. He is the scourge of the Asuras of the universe.'

THE TALE OF DHRUVA

MAITREYA CONTINUED, 'THE GREAT RISHIS, BRAHMA'S SONS SANAKA, Sanandana, Sanatana, Sanatkumara, Narada, Ribhu, Hamsa, Aruna and Yati never married, but were celibates all their lives.

Adharma's wife, Mrisha, who is falsehood, bore him twins – Dambha, hypocrisy, and Maya, deceit. Nirriti is the Evil Spirit who rules the Southwest. He had no children and he adopted the twins, who later became a couple, when Dambha married Maya.

Dambha fathered Lobha, greed, and Nikriti, wickedness, on his twin. These, in turn, begot Krodha, anger, and Himsa, violence. These begot Kali, rage, and his sister Durukti, who personifies abusiveness. Kali begot Bhaya, fear, and Mrityu, death, on his sister. Bhaya and Mrityu had twins, too – Niraya, hell, and Yatana, torture.

These are the incestuous spirits of darkness that finally plunge creation into endless night, and bring the Pralaya down to wash the worlds.

Vidura, you know that Svayambhuva Manu's sons Priyavrata and Uttanapada were blessed with Vishnu's amsa shakti. They were sovereign guardians of the Earth.

Uttanapada had two wives, Suniti and Suruchi. Each of them bore him a son, Suniti's prince was called Dhruva, and Suruchi's boy was Uttama. But Uttanapada did not love his wives equally. He had time and affection only for Suruchi, and so too, he cared only for Suruchi's son Uttama, and never spared a moment for Dhruva.

One day, when the boys were children, both five years old, Uttanapada set Uttama on his lap and was caressing him and playing fondly with him. Dhruva saw this, and came innocently to try and climb onto his father's lap, as well. But Uttanapada pushed him away roughly.

The queen Suruchi laughed viciously. She said, "It's a pity you were born from another woman. You will never climb onto your father's lap, or for that matter, onto his throne. If you want your father's love, pray to Narayana that, in your next birth, you are born as my son. That is the only way your father will ever love you."

What she said pierced Dhruva's heart like fire. His little chest heaved, tears flowed down his face, and he hissed like a serpent beaten with a stick. All the while, his father never said a word. Dhruva ran from there to his mother, the gentle Suniti. He fell sobbing into her lap and could not speak. Some young women of the harem told Suniti what Suruchi had said to Dhruva, and how the king said not a word in protest, but pushed Dhruva off his lap. Tears leaked down Suniti's face.

Then controlling herself, she said to Dhruva, "Ah my child, these are sins from lives past being visited upon us. Don't let jealousy overwhelm you. It is the pain we cause others that comes to torment us inevitably. Alas, it is true that your father has no time for me, that he treats me as less than a maid servant in this palace.

What Suruchi said is true, my son. If you want to be a favoured son like Uttama, if you want a throne for yourself someday, you must worship Vishnu. For you there is no other salvation. Why, Brahma himself became Paramesthin, the highest God, by worshipping Vishnu's lotus feet."

Dhruva listened to her in silence, and gradually his sobbing subsided. A great change came over his young heart at what his mother said. He decided that he would leave his father's palace, his very city, and worship Blue Vishnu. Narada learnt by intuition what Dhruva meant to do, and came to Uttanapada's city. He found Dhruva walking out of the city gates.

He laid his hand on Dhruva's head, blessing him, and said, "Admirable is the spirit of the kshatriya! You are just a child, yet you would rather embrace the wilderness than swallow your stepmother's insult. Bless you, Dhruva. But tell me where will you go, who have grown in a palace, in the very lap of luxury?"

Dhruva said in wonder, "How did you know what I meant to do? But I cannot live here anymore, after what my stepmother said. Besides, my own father did not say a word to stop her."

Narada said, "Honour and dishonour are mere perceptions. Moreover, you are just a child. This is no age for you to take such exception to what Suruchi said, this is the time for you to be at play. Sorrow and joy, fortune and misery are what we inherit from our karma of other lives, Dhruva. A man should be content with what fate bestows on him; that is his greatest chance of finding happiness."

Narada saw the determination in the child's face. He continued, "Besides, the God Vishnu, whom your mother told you to worship, is hard to please. Why, Rishis who have done tapasya in his name, birth after birth, with no attachment, hardly find him. You are just a child, and you don't know what you are doing. Dhruva, go back home; this path is not for you, certainly not yet.

A man should feel delight towards his superiors, friendship towards his equals and compassion towards his inferiors. If you remember this, you will pass safely through life, and no envy or sorrow will shake you. And when you are older, Dhruva, and your heart is quieter, then perhaps you can indeed seek the path of the Lord."

Dhruva said quietly, in such an adult manner, "Truly, yours is the way of peace, the gentlest way for the human heart. But, Narada, my heart is broken beyond repair. I am a kshatriya, a wild and proud spirit. I am ambitious beyond all moderation. I want to attain to a place higher than any other; I want to be greater than any of my ancestors. You are Brahma's son, my lord, and range over the world like the sun, bringing light to those that seek it. Enlighten me now, good Muni, show me the way to the peace of my spirit."

Hearing the child's sweet voice, seeing his resolve, Narada was moved to tears. Perhaps, he saw before him an image of himself, when he had been Dhruva's age.

The Muni said, "Dhruva, your mother has already shown you the right way. Vishnu is your only refuge. So, if you absolutely must, go to the Madhuvana on the banks of the Yamuna. Narayana is always there. Bathe thrice a day, at each sandhya, in the holy waters. Then sit in a comfortable yogasana, set your mind on the form of the Lord, and worship him with this mantra."

Narada described the Lord Vishnu's form in some detail, how he was blue as rain clouds, how he wore a brilliant yellow robe, carried the sankha, chakra, gada and the saringa in four hands, how his eyes were always slightly red, and how refulgent and gentle his presence was. Narada told Dhruva about the dazzling lotus that sprouted from Hari's navel for which he was called Padmanabha, the Lotus in which Brahma was born. He then taught Dhruva the sacred mantra by which he could summon the Lord Mahavishnu to him.

"*Aum Namo Bhagavate Vasudevayah*. This is the Lord's mantra, child. Worship him with it, and he will give you whatever your heart wants."

Dhruva prostrated himself at Narada's feet. Narada blessed Dhruva, and watched the child stride away on his little legs, towards the Madhuvana on the banks of the Yamuna.

Dhruva reached the Madhuvana and began his tapasya, just as Narada had taught him. He bathed in the midnight blue waters of the sacred river, and sat on a bed of kusa grass in the svastikasana. He controlled his breath in pranayama, and began to meditate on the Lord's Form, as Narada had described it to him, and to chant, in his mind, the mantra the Muni had taught him. Dhyana came naturally, effortlessly, to Dhruva. Quickly, he became absorbed – the kind of absorption that the greatest Rishi finds after many lives of meditation and worship.

The first month, Dhruva ate the fruits, kapittha and badara, that he found in the forest. He ate once in three days. The second month he ate only grass and dry leaves, every sixth day. The third month, only water passed his lips every ninth day. The fourth month, he neither drank nor ate anything; only the breath he drew sustained him. Soon, he breathed only once every twelve days.

Dhruva's tapasya dismayed the Devas in their heaven. It spumed as spirit fire through their subtle realms. They sought to disturb the child. They sent tigers, serpents and evil spirits to frighten Dhruva. But he was so absorbed in the Lord's mantra that he did not notice these beasts and ghouls.

Came the fifth month of Dhruva's tapasya, and the child stopped breathing. Now, only the mantra, *Aum Namo Bhagavate Vasudevayah*, held his life in his body. Dhruva withdrew his senses from their objects and his mind into his soul, his atman.

Standing on one leg, still as a post, in dharana, he meditated on the Brahman. The Earth tilted to one side, like a ferry carrying an elephant, when five-year-old Dhruva pressed down on it with his big toe to find balance. The three worlds began to quake with Dhruva's tapasya. When Dhruva stopped breathing, all the Gods and all their creatures could not breathe anymore. The Devas came flying to Vishnu.

Indra cried, "Lord, none of us, no living creature, can breathe because Dhruva holds his breath. Have mercy, Hari, make the child stop his dhyana."

Vishnu smiled. "Dhruva has merged his soul in mine, in the Brahman. That is why none of you can breathe. But I will go to him now and make him stop his tapasya. I must bless him, he is my bhakta."

Vishnu came to the banks of the Yamuna. Suddenly, Dhruva found his heart empty of the image of the Lord that he was absorbed in. He found himself waking from samadhi, his trance. He opened his eyes, and saw the Blue God before him. The child prostrated himself before Vishnu: like a stick, so thin had he become. Then he looked up, his eyes full of absolute love, as if he would drink the Lord down into his little body with his gaze. He held out his arms, as if he embraced the Lord. There was such a radiant smile on Dhruva's face, and his eyes streamed tears of joy. He rose and stood staring rapturously at the Lord. Vishnu saw his lips move, but no word came from them.

Narayana knew what Dhruva wanted. He wanted to praise his God, but being a child he hadn't the words. Gently, Vishnu touched Dhruva's cheek with the Panchajanya, his conch that is an embodiment of the Vedas. At once, the child had the gift of tongues. He began to praise Vishnu, and his speech was that of Rishis'.

"I salute you, Lord, who have awakened my intelligence, and given me the power of speech! You are the Truth; you create the worlds of maya. You create Mahat and the Aham Tattvas. You create the gunas and the Gods of the indriyas. You remain hidden within all these, like the fire in the arani twig. Those who do not know the truth think of you as being this created universe, teeming with creatures and lives. They do not know your other Self, where mind and speech cannot arrive.

Lord, you gave Brahma his vision of the truth, and he was like a man who awoke from a dream. You save us from the wheel of births and deaths, O Vishnu. Blessed are those who want moksha and nothing less from you. You are the Kalpa vriksha that gives immortality. If a man sees you, then asks you for anything less than mukti, surely he is the most unfortunate man alive.

Why, the condition called Brahmi, union with the Brahman, which is pure bliss, does not compare with the ecstasy of listening to your legends, or of meditating on your lotus feet. I beg you Lord, bless me with the company of the great men who are your bhaktas. Listening to their tales of you, I will surely cross over the dangerous sea of samsara, churning with calamities.

Lord, your bhaktas forget their own bodies; what then, of their sons and daughters, their wives, their homes or their wealth? You withdraw this universe into your navel at the end of the kalpa, turn your gaze into yourself, and fall into the great sleep on the coils of Ananta.

I am still the Jivatma, Lord, and you are the Paramatma. You are pure and I am tainted by my desires. I am ignorant, and am born and die, again and again. You are primeval, changeless, birthless, and deathless too. You are pure knowledge, Lord, you are the highest bliss!"

Vishnu was delighted with Dhruva. The Blue God said, "I know why you began this tapasya and you shall have what you first wanted. But I will give you more, brilliant child. Dhruva, one day, I will give you an eternal place in the sky, higher than the place of the Saptarishi. The sun and the moon will turn around you; the galaxy will orbit you. And you, blessed Dhruva, will be their still, unmoving centre. Why, when the kalpas end and the pralaya extinguishes all the stars, your place will be spared.

But, noble child, that was not why you first worshipped me. You wanted to be a king, to inherit your father's kingdom. King you shall be, Dhruva, and rule for thirty-six thousand years. Finally, when you leave your body, you shall come straight to me, and be free.

As for your brother Uttama, he will die when he goes hunting, and his mother Suruchi will die broken-hearted in a forest fire, searching for her lost son.

Dhruva, I am Yagna. When you are king, you will worship me with a thousand great yagnas, to bless the earth. And when you come to me at the end of your life, you will not return to samsara, to this world of births and deaths. Why, Dhruva, then you shall have my kingdom to rule!"

With that, Vishnu melted out of Dhruva's sight. Dhruva stood for a long time, quivering with rapture at having seen the Lord. Yet, he was not as pleased as he might have been.

"The Lord Mahavishnu came to me. Rishis like Sanaka and Sanatkumara are not as fortunate as I am. But I did not ask him for moskha! Ah, what a fool I am. I should have listened to Narada. He told me it wasn't time for me to do tapasya, that I should ignore what my mother Suruchi said. But I did not listen to him. And I have betrayed myself. With just six months of tapasya, the Lord came to me, but I behaved like a beggar. I, who could have had moksha, begged for samsara."

Deeply disappointed with himself, Dhruva set out on the long journey back to his father's kingdom.

Meanwhile, a few days after Dhruva left for the forest, Narada went to meet Uttanapada. He found him terribly distraught. The great king of the earth was pale, and weeping.

Narada asked, "Why are you crying, Kshatriya? What calamity has overtaken your kingdom?"

Uttanapada wiped his tears, and fetched a sigh as deep as the sky. He said, "Oh, I am a sinner, Narada; there is no man more heartless or weak than I am."

"What happened, my lord?" cried Narada, knowing very well what tormented Manu's son.

"Ah, my little Dhruva! How savagely I treated him. For my mad love of Suruchi, I forbade my own son to climb onto my lap. He saw me playing with his brother, and he wanted my attention too. But Muni, I pushed him away. How I must have wounded his little heart. And now, my five-year-old child has gone away into the forest by himself to perform tapasya.

Narada, I will never see him again, because surely by now, a wolf or a tiger has eaten my tender boy. Oh, I have lost him forever."

And Uttanapada wept again.

Narada said, beaming, "You don't know who your little Dhruva is. No creature in the three worlds can harm him, because he has the protection of Narayana himself. Kshatriya, your child will be the greatest man alive someday, and then you will have immortal fame because you are Dhruva's father. Why, your Dhruva will achieve what the Devas never can! Besides, stop worrying about never seeing him again. I tell you, Dhruva will return to you sooner than you think."

Narada blessed Uttanapada, and went off on his endless way. The days wore on, and the king was agog for his son's return. The days wore into weeks, the weeks into months, and still there was no sign of Dhruva coming home. The king was beside himself with restlessness and anxiety. He never stopped tormenting himself with guilt. When five months had passed, one day a breathless messenger arrived around midmorning in Uttanapada's court.

"Your son is coming home, lord," the man panted. "Prince Dhruva is on his way back from the forest!"

Uttanapada sprang up, and cried, "Let my city be decked out to welcome my child! Fetch my queens and Uttama. Let my Rishis go with me. This is the happiest day of my life, for I had lost my most precious treasure, and now the Lord Vishnu has returned him to me."

Uttanapada rewarded the man who brought the news with a priceless pearl necklace that he undid from around his own neck. The king went to his city gates with his queens, Suniti and Suruchi, and young prince Uttama. He drove out some distance in his chariot and stood waiting breathlessly. Finally, he saw the sight that was like his very life returning to him: he saw Dhruva marching serenely up the king's highway that led to his father's capital: the child who had been freed of all his sins by the vision of Hari and the touch of the Lord's feet. Uttanapada saw a fine radiance enfolded his child, an aura of grace. Leaping down from his chariot, with a roar of joy, the king ran to Dhruva, seized him up in his arms, bathed him in tears and smothered him with kisses.

Conches resounded throughout the city, drums and flutes sounded, and the Vedas were chanted aloud. Dhruva touched his father's feet, and then went to both the queens for their blessings. He bent at Suruchi's feet and she raised him up with a cry, clasped him to her and said in a voice choked with tears, "Live long, my son!"

The wise know that all creatures bow to one with whom Vishnu is pleased, for such a one has universal compassion.

Now Uttama came up to Dhruva and the brothers embraced fervently, tears in their eyes and their hair standing on end for love, to touch each other. Then, Suniti had her son and hugged him to her and would not release him.

The people crowded around the radiant Dhruva, reaching out to caress the child, or just touch him. They said, "The Lord has blessed you that your son has come home. From now on, Dhruva shall be the protector of the earth!"

Uttanapada set Dhruva on a fine she-elephant, and entered the city with his son, where alligator festoons hung colourfully, as did plantain leaves and trees and young areca-nut trees, with their bunches of fruit. At every doorstep pitchers of holy water lay, with lamps burning upon them, and adorned with mango leaves, bright cloths, garlands, and strings of pearls around them.

The ramparts of the city blazed in gold and the roofs of the mansions shone like the domes of pushpaka vimanas. All the streets had been swept, washed, then sprinkled with fragrant sandal water. Then auspicious fried rice grains were spread over the paving, flowers in every hue, fruit and other sacred things.

When they saw Dhruva, the women of the city ululated their welcome in love, and flung white mustard seeds, unbroken rice, curd, water, durva grass and flowers over his elephant and the blessed prince. They sang in rapture for him, and thus, he entered his father's palace.

Dhruva walked past his father's palace, and lo, another palace stood behind it, as if it had fallen from Swarga, an unearthly, magnificent palace, a palace of the Devas, with great marble steps leading up into it.

It had pillars of gold and floors paved with precious jewels. The beds in that palace were white and soft as milk-froth, their bedsteads made of ivory and chased with gold. Here were crystal walls, and great emeralds laid into them; here were jewel lamps, which lovely women held, women carved from precious stones themselves.

Dhruva's gardens sprawled like small, enchanted kingdoms, and in them grew every kind of celestial tree, parijatas never found on earth. Brilliant birds teemed in their branches, and sang in ecstasy. Rhapsodies of flowers decked those branches and black bees swarmed at these, drinking of their heady nectar.

Fine tanks adorned these great gardens, with steps of chrysoberyl, precious vaidurya, leading down to their transparent water, on which white and blue and violet lotuses floated, opening and closing to mystic rhythms, unknown and secret. Regal swans swam here, and duck and ibis, teal, goose and cormorant.

Uttanapada and all the people of his city saw the miracle, and stood gazing. Thus, Dhruva began living in his father's city, now as his favourite son. The years passed, and they were filled with the rarest grace, the grace of Vishnu, and they passed like a marvellous dream.

Dhruva grew to manhood, and Uttanapada crowned him king. With that, Uttanapada felt a great detachment come over him, and he left his kingdom and went away to the forest to seek his peace, to seek his soul and mukti,' said Maitreya Muni to Vidura, who sat absorbed before him.

DHRUVA INVADES ALAKA

AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE, MAITREYA CONTINUED IN HIS SERENE WAY, 'Dhruva married Prajapati Sisumara's daughter Bhrami, and they had two sons, Kalpa and Vatsara.

Dhruva married again, now Vayu Deva's daughter Ila. On her he sired Utkala, a prince whom women coveted like a precious jewel, and a boy who was a master of many occult siddhis.

Meanwhile, Dhruva's brother Uttama was a free spirit and never married, but lived in his father's palace. One day, he went hunting in the Himalayas and came too near the secret city of Kubera and the yakshas, the city called Alaka.Uttama found not a tiger or lion, but a yaksha who challenged him to battle, and killed that prince. The news came home and Uttama's mother died of shock.

Dhruva rode north to the Himalaya, and arrived at Alaka, the white city of the yakshas, of pisachas, bhutas and other Siva ganas. Dhruva raised his sea conch and blew a blast on it that set adrift the snows around the valley in which Alaka nestled. The yakshis within Alaka shivered to hear that sound. But the yakshas and rakshasas of that city streamed out of their lofty gates and flew at Dhruva. They were a hundred and thirty thousand feral warriors.

In a wink, Dhruva shot each one with three arrows and the wild beings were astonished and saluted his archery. Then they covered Dhruva, who fought alone, with a storm of every kind of weapon and missile, so the sun was hidden in the sky and the siddhas who watched the encounter from the air, invisibly, cried, "Alas! Here ends the race of Manu," because they could not see Uttanapada's son anymore and were certain he was dead.

Suddenly, the virile twanging of a great bow rent the air again, and set off avalanches, and like the sun from a bank of black clouds, Dhruva's shining chariot emerged from the darkness of the yaksha army. And as the north wind scatters cloud armies, Dhruva decimated the army of Alaka. Soon the snowfield outside the gates of that city was stained crimson and strewn with heads severed from their throats, whose ears glittered with precious earrings, with severed arms radiant with priceless bracelets, with sturdy golden yaksha thighs hewn off at the knees, with colourful turbans undone and bright on the pale ground, with necklaces and other ornaments of inestimable worth, for they were gifts from Kubera, Lokapala of the north, master of the earth's nine treasures – all of which enthralled the brave and made the faint-hearted quail.

The yakshas, rakshasas and yatudhanas left alive, fled from the awesome kshatriya, like elephants from an angry lion. Dhruva stood panting in his chariot amidst the dead. He wanted to enter the white city, Alaka, but thought better of it, saying to his sarathy, "They are masters of sorcery, we must be careful."

He had hardly said this, when they heard a great noise like a roaring sea, and saw dust and snow flying on every side, as if raised by enormous invisible hands. At once, black clouds filled the sky, surely by wizardry, and immense gashes of lightning sharded the darkness, and terrifying peals of thunder rocked the valley of Alaka. A horrible rain began – of blood, phlegm, pus, excrement, simmering fat and urine!

A mountain appeared above, eerie and shining, and from it, torrents of maces, clubs, swords, arrows and every other kind of missile lashed Dhruva's chariot. Serpents fell hissing loud as thunder and spewing flames from their eyes, and streaked at Uttanapada's son. Herds of black and evil elephants, prides of lions and great tigers rushed at him from every side. And a cataract of water, flecked with blood swept at Dhruva down the steep sides of the valley.

The Rishis of heaven filled the sky in a luminous congregation, and began to chant prayers for Dhruva. They said to him, "May Vishnu, whose name conquers every obstacle, protect you!"

Any other man would have lost his reason to see the sinister apparitions around him, but Dhruva remained calm at the heart of the spells that threatened him. Hearing the Rishis, he raised his bow and said the mantra for the Narayanastra, Vishnu's awesome weapon. As every sorrow does at the dawning of nirvana, all the guhyakas and yakshas' magic vanished around him, leaving the sky clear blue and the valley deserted around him, save for the corpses with which he had embellished it. A million golden arrows, with feathers like the swan's, flared from his bow, and with cries like peacocks entering a jungle, they flew into the thick yaksha legions now gathered again at the gates of Alaka.

As cobras do, with hoods unfurled, the yakshas rushed at Dhruva with their bows raised and spewing arrows. But Vishnu's grace was upon the kshatriya, and his bow was an unearthly weapon. He cut them down with supernatural archery, sending them in an instant to the highest swarga (where Rishis of lifelong celibacy dwell), their spirits piercing their way through the blazing sphere of the Sun.

Dhruva's grandfather, Svayambhuva Manu, saw his grandson slaughtering thousands upon thousands of yakshas from his marvellous chariot that flitted everywhere. Moved to pity for the mountain beings, whose piteous screams rang through the three realms, Manu spoke to Dhruva.

"Stop, child! This terrible rage will get you to Tama, to hell. One yaksha killed your brother, and you are slaughtering their entire race. You are butchering them as if they are animals for hunting. You are Vishnu's dearest bhakta. You are lord of the earth. You should set an example for the world, of patience, compassion and friendship to all creatures. You should look upon all beings equally, as part of your own soul, as part of your God Hari.

My son, the yaksha who killed your brother was only an instrument of fate. He died because his time had come to die, and because God willed it so. Murdering these innocent yakshas will not bring Uttama back to you, nor will it turn time back. Seek the Lord Narayana, Dhruva, as you did when you were a child; seek your peace of mind in him.

And remember these yakshas are Kubera's people, and he is the Lord Siva's dearest friend. You are in mortal peril, Dhruva. Stop this madness, and beg Kubera's forgiveness for your crime."

And Svayambhuva Manu vanished from the sky with all the Devarishis. Dhruva stood quivering in his chariot for a moment; then he flung down his bow with a cry of sorrow. The yakshas he had left alive ran back into their city, and now Kubera, master of treasures, God of the north, came out of his lofty gates, surrounded by a host of charanas, yakshas and kinnaras, all wonderful divine beings.

Dhruva folded his hands to Kubera, and stood with his head bent.

Kubera said, "Greetings, Kshatriya! Hail, matchless warrior!" Dhruva remained silent, full of remorse.

Kubera said gently, "Ah, don't let guilt torment you, O King. Neither did my yaksha kill your brother, nor did you kill all these yakshas, guhyakas and rakshasas who have died here today. No, they died of fate, and by God's will. For their time had come. Dhruva, you have given up your enmity towards us, and that makes me glad. Now go back to your city, with my blessing. I know you are the Lord Vishnu's favourite bhakta. Ask me for a boon, anything you want, and I will give it to you."

Overwhelmed by this forgiveness, Dhruva bowed low to Kubera, and said, "May I always have an image of my Lord Narayana in my heart, and may hatred and revenge never enter it again."

Kubera blessed Dhruva, laying his palm on the kshatriya's head, then vanished before his eyes. Dhruva turned back home to his capital. The war at the gates of Alaka transformed the young king. His bhakti grew; he worshipped Vishnu incessantly and dedicated his life and his rule to the Blue God who lies upon the infinite sea on his serpent bed. Slowly, Dhruva began to see Vishnu everywhere, in all creatures and in himself, alike.

Dhruva ruled his kingdom as if it was a part of himself. His people were like his own children, and so they lived in his country, as if they were in their father's house. For thirty-six thousand years the great kshatriya, Uttanapada's son, ruled, enjoying every pleasure and quelling his sins with penance and prayer. Dharma, artha and kama he experienced, and then he grew tired of the world and of kingdom. Dhruva relinquished his throne to his son, and went away to Badarikasrama.

He bathed in the holy rivers on the sacred mountain, purifying his body, then sat in tapasya, to purify his mind, to burn away its every vestige of attachment. He sat in a yogasana, and restrained his breath with pranayama. When this was done, he turned his thought to the Lord's Viswarupa, Vishnu's material Form. Quickly, as if powerful grace was upon him, he lost every sense of his own identity of being apart from the object of his meditation. Plunged in samadhi, he lost even the notion of the Viswarupa.

Only perfect, unalloyed bhakti remained. Now and again, tears coursed down his face, when God's love overwhelmed him, and the hair all over his body stood on end for incredible ecstasy. He no longer remembered who he was; all his consciousness was focused on just one thought – Narayana. One day, Dhruva saw a vimana, which lit up the four quarters with its brightness, flying down to the earth. In it he saw two Devas. They were youthful, dark, four-armed, their eyes like red lotuses, and incomparably handsome. They wore unworldly raiment, crowns on their heads, and all sorts of indescribable ornaments.

Dhruva knew they were Vishnu's servitors, Nanda and Sunanda. Great excitement upon him, Dhruva folded his hands, bowed and began to babble the Blue God's thousand names in fervour.

Nanda and Sunanda said, "Peerless Kshatriya, we have come to take you to our Lord's kingdom, which not the Saptarishis have attained, but only gaze up at from their realm below. You shall have a higher place then theirs, O Dhruva, and the Sun and the Moon, all the Planets and the Stars shall revolve around you, always keeping you to their right!

None of your ancestors has approached that realm, Vishnu's own loka, adored by all the lower worlds. Come, Dhruva, come with us in this vimana, for our Lord has sent us to fetch you to him."

Dhruva was radiant. He bathed in the nearby mountain stream, performed his nitya karma, worshipped the Rishis of the mountain and took their blessings. He made a pradakshina around the vimana. Now his body shone like molten gold. Dhruva started forward to climb into the vimana, when Yama, the Lord of Death, appeared before him and prostrated himself before Uttanapada's son. Dhruva set his right foot on Yama Deva's head, and entered the chariot of the Gods.

The sky erupted in music; gandharvas sang and apsaras danced. Petal storms rained down on Dhruva. But as the vimana was about to lift away from the earth, Dhruva thought of his mother Suniti. He thought, "How can I fly away to Vishnuloka, leaving my mother behind?"

Then, the two Vishnusevitas, Nanda and Sunanda, pointed above them, and Dhruva saw another vimana already bearing the queen mother Suniti aloft. Their vimana flew up, silently as flowers, and at every level of the sky they rose through, unearthly flower rains greeted Dhruva, and celestial minstrels played and sang his praises, as did the Devas from their own vimanas.

By the path called devayana, the path of the devas, Dhruva rose beyond the triloka, the three worlds, flew past the Saptarishi, and arrived in Vishnuloka that lies above all these realms. The world of Vishnu illumines the other worlds with its splendour. Only the truly compassionate ever come into this realm, only those that have the highest, most constant punya. They are purified of all their sins; their minds are full of peace and they regard all beings as part of themselves. They look upon the Lord Hari as their only family, their father and mother, their all.

And arriving among those realised ones, Uttanapada's son Dhruva became a jewel of the worlds, a constant star in the northern sky. It is around his station in the firmament that all the other heavenly bodies revolve.

Once, Narada, who first set Dhruva out on his journey when the prince was a child of five, said in wonder at the yagna of Prachetas:

"But, ah, Dhruva was no ordinary kshatriya. Which kshatriya could have achieved what he did in one lifetime, or in a hundred? No, there is a deep mystery behind who that prince actually was. And no one except Narayana himself knows the answer to that riddle." '

Maitreya Muni said to Vidura, 'That, O Kurushreshta, best of the Kurus, is the story of Dhruva, and it is a tale that blesses him who tells it, and him who hears it equally, for the grace of Krishna is hidden in it. He who hears it finds wealth, glory and a long life; he has his sins washed from him and evolves spiritually. The Gods bless a man who tells or listens to the legend of Dhruva; why, in time, the story of Dhruva is a seed that leads a man to become as a God himself, and confers Devaloka and even the higher realms on him.

Tradition has it that this story should be recited aloud on amavasya and paurnima, on the twelfth day of a fortnight, when the moon transits the constellation Sravana, on the day of Sankramana, and on Sundays. Anyone who relates the legend of Dhruva on these days, and who keeps a pure mind as he does so, is freed of all his sins and finds moksha for himself.

God blesses a man who tells the tale of Dhruva, which is said to be a drink of nectar on the path to nirvana,' Maitreya concluded the story of the boy who found favour with Mahavishnu when he was just five.

THE DESCENDANTS OF DHRUVA

VIDURA NOW ASKED, 'WHO WERE THE PRACHETAS? WHOSE CHILDREN? Where was their yagna of which you speak held? Muni, I have heard that Narada Muni's version of the legends of the Lord is the finest version of all. Tell me those tales, divine Maitreya.'

Maitreya said, 'When Dhruva left his kingdom and took sannyasa in the forest, his son Utkala did not want to become king. Ever since he was a child, Utkala had the temperament of a Rishi. His mind was naturally as calm as the Manasarovara; he was detached and spiritual. Utkala saw the Atman in all things and everywhere, and the world around him abiding in it.

When he was a little older, Utkala began a rigorous practice of yoga, and burnt away the sins of his past lives. He realised the Atman is the Brahman in whom all dualities disappear, the Brahman who is the embodiment of eternal knowledge and bliss. Soon, Utkala saw just the Brahman everywhere, at all times, and he began to behave and appear like an idiot: for so the greatest mystics do. He seemed dull and foolish, whereas, in fact, he was like a fire that did not smoke anymore, or give out its heat, but burned deep within itself with the purest flames.

So the elders of the sabha made Utkala's younger brother, Bhrami's son Vatsara, the king. Vatsara married Svarvithi, and she bore him six fine princes – Pushparna, Tigmaketu, Isa, Urja, Vasu and Jaya.

Pushparna had two wives; Prabha, who is daylight, and Dosha, who is the night. Prabha's sons were Pratar, dawn, Madhyandina, midday, and Sayana, evening.

Dosha's three sons were Pradosha, the first part of the night, Nishita, midnight, and Vyushta, the night's final hours before dawn.

Vyushta married Pushkarini, and their son was called Sarvatejas, the all-brilliant. He then married Akuti, and she gave him Chakshusa Manu, the Manu after Svayambhuva Manu.

Chakshusa Manu married Nadhvala, who bore him twelve saintly sons – Puru, Kutsa, Trita, Dyumna, Satyavata, Rita, Vrata, Agnistoma, Atiratra, Pradyumna, Shibi and Ulmuka.

Ulmuka married Pushkarani, and she bore him six fine sons – Anga, Sumanas, Khyati, Kratu, Angiras and Gaya.

Anga's wife Sunitha bore him the powerful, but evil, prince Vena. Disgusted by his son's ways, Anga left his capital in despair, and went to the forest and sannyasa. In rage, the Rishis of the earth cursed Vena for causing his father such grief, and that kshatriya fell dead where he stood, as if he had been struck by lightning.

There followed a time when the earth had no king, and the people suffered at the hands of brigands and robbers. It was then that Prithu became Lord of the world, and founded the first cities of men, where they could live in safety. Prithu was an amsa of Vishnu Narayana, and it was the Blue God's power he wielded.'

Vidura asked, 'It is curious how the Rishis of the world cursed Vena to die. Even if a king sins, it is not for his subjects to punish him. It must have been a grievous crime for which the Sages punished him with death. Tell me what Sunitha's son did.'

'The Rajarishi Anga performed a magnificent Asvamedha yagna. Though the greatest Munis in the three worlds presided over his horse sacrifice, the Gods did not come to receive their share of the havis.

In amazement, the ritviks said to King Anga, "The Devas do not accept the burnt offerings or the oblations poured into the fire. Everything we have offered is auspicious and pure; we have performed the rituals flawlessly in accordance with the Veda. We brahmanas have kept our vows strictly and we do not know why the Devas refuse your offerings."

The king was aghast. He sought the permission of the Rishis and his family to break the vow of silence he had sworn until the yagna was completed. When he had it, Anga said to all those gathered there solemnly, "The Devas refuse the havis we offer them, and they will not partake of the cups of Soma rasa. If anyone of you knows what sin I have committed for the Gods to be wroth with me, I would hear of it."

The great brahmanas said, "In this life you are not guilty of any sin that would keep the Devas from accepting the havis and the Soma rasa. But you did sin in your past life, and that is why you have no son and the Gods do not bless your Asvamedha yagna."

The worried king asked, "What shall I do?"

"Worship the Lord Vishnu. If he is pleased and blesses you, all the other Gods will follow, and you will be forgiven your sin and have a son to inherit your throne."

Anga agreed readily, and the purodasa, the main offering of his sacrifice of ground rice, was made to Vishnu as Sipivishta, the God who enters the sacrificial animal as the spirit of the yagna. Here Anga worshipped Narayana as Putrakamesthin, who would give him a son and satisfy his putrakama.

The sacrificial fire blazed up in tall flowers, and a splendid figure arose from them. He wore golden ornaments and exquisite raiment, and carried a golden chalice in his hands that brimmed with a silvery payasa. Anga looked at his priests, and they nodded that he should take the payasa from the spirit messenger.

Anga stepped up and took the payasa from the messenger. Its aroma filled the yagnashala – a scent of heaven. Anga brought the sparkling chalice to his queen Sunitha, and made her drink from it. The Devas now flew down in luminous forms and took the rest of the havis from Anga's ritviks. The yagna was complete. Anga rewarded the brahmanas who had sat over it generously, and returned to his palace.

Soon, Sunitha came to him and announced that she was pregnant. But her pregnancy was a morbid experience for that queen, and though she dared not admit it, she felt certain that a dark and evil spirit had filled her womb. In time, she gave birth to a lusty son. Celebrations broke out across

Anga's kingdom. But as the king's son grew up it became obvious that the boy had inherited a portion of the evil Spirit of adharma from his grandfather Mrityu, to whom he was particularly attached.

From the first, he was addicted to killing. As a boy of ten, he spent all his days roaming the forest with a bow and arrows and mindlessly killing any creature that crossed his path. For a while this seemed to satisfy the bloodlust that raged in him. But soon, he turned to more savage sport – he began to secretly kill the young servant boys in his father's palace and city. With the help of some young henchmen he gathered around him, he molested them violently, then slaughtered them like animals on a hunt.

The people began calling the prince Vena, the Tormentor.

After a while, word reached the king of his son's doings, and Anga did his best to reform the boy. He spoke to him about dharma; he had the wisest men in his court and his kingdom speak to the boy. When these gentle methods failed, he tried punishing his son, by restricting his movements, and then locking him up in his rooms. But he doted on his son and hardly saw him with clear eyes. Vena would pretend that he had turned over a new leaf, saying exactly what that shrewd and evil youth knew his father wanted to hear from him, about how he had discovered God and his peace, and how sorry he was for what he had done.

Anga would relent and give his son his freedom again. For a while it would truly seem the prince had changed, but then once more a trail of young mutilated bodies would appear across the city. Vena was just sixteen and the king still could not believe that the monster at large in his city was his own son. Yet Anga could not turn his face from the truth forever.'

Maitreya paused thoughtfully, then continued, 'Vidura, I have heard the wisest Munis say that it is better to have a bad son than a good one. For when a man is faced with incurable discord and anxiety inside his home, his thoughts turn to escape, they turn to the forest and the quest for peace.

Anga could not sleep. His life had turned into a living hell, a waking nightmare. And one midnight, when he couldn't bear the torture anymore, when he finally realised that there was no cure for the disease that was his own son, the king stole out of his wife's bed, crept out of his palace and walked out of his city, never to return.

Came the dawn and all the king's subjects, his royal priests, his ministers and friends, and his family learnt what had happened. They were shocked. Soldiers and agents of every sort were sent abroad to comb the earth for the vanished king, but they sought him like yogins do who seek the Brahman not in their own hearts but outside themselves. They found no trace of Anga. Some say the king never left his city, but remained there disguised for some weeks, until the search for him was abandoned, and then he went abroad.'

VENA AND THE BIRTH OF PRITHU

MAITREYA WENT ON, 'ANARCHY THREATENED THE KINGDOM AFTER Anga's disappearance, and thieves and murderers began to stalk the land and its towns and villages quite openly. Bhrigu and some other Rishis went to queen Sunitha and said, "The people are terrified. We must have a king, or there is no telling what violence will be overtake us."

The same day, though almost every minister and brahmana in the kingdom had grave reservations, though the people were bitterly opposed to him, Vena the Tormentor was crowned in the royal sabha, at an opulent investiture. There was no other heir; there was no other choice.

However, when the brigands, who had been terrorizing the country since Anga abandoned his kingdom, heard that Vena the terrible had been crowned, they scuttled back into hiding, like rats that sense a serpent is loose. Vena became king and he became more vain and arrogant than ever: he became more evil than before. He thought of himself as having the power of the eight Dikpalas to wield, and treated even the greatest Sages – who he knew were opposed to his becoming king – with the utmost contempt.

He mounted his chariot, took an army with him, and ranged the world that was now his to rule, like a bull elephant unrestrained with goads. His advent shook heaven and earth for the drummers and conch-blowers that went with him. Vena was abroad with a specific purpose. He came to curtail the influence of the brahmanas of the earth; why, he came to destroy the Rishis' power forever.

Wherever he went his criers shouted the king's proclamation: "Dvijas, you shall not worship anymore in my kingdom, no Vedas shall be chanted and no yagna fire lit – on pain of death!"

The brahmanas realised that this king was none other than the dread Spirit of anarchy incarnated as a kshatriya, he was Adharma embodied to plunge the world down into the depths of hell.

The Rishis said, "Great danger has arisen, great evil is here to suppress the sanatana dharma. We are like ants caught in the middle of a log of wood that burns from both ends. We made this vile prince the king because we feared anarchy in the kingdom. But the terror he brings is worse than any that we imagined. He is more dangerous than a serpent fed on milk is to the man that feeds it. He threatens not just our lives but our souls."

The Rishis of the earth met and decided they would approach Vena to try to persuade him of the error of his ways. They came to his city and his palace and were shown in to the king who did not deign to rise from his throne to greet them. He offered them no welcome, no arghya or padya, but made them wait an hour outside his doors before having them shown in to stand before him like common petitioners.

The Rishis said gently to the tyrant, "Kshatriya, we have come to give you advice that will increase your life, your wealth, your fame and your glory. Vena, a king who follows dharma lives long and his people love and bless him. He finds a lofty place for himself in heaven. Why, the commonest folk who live in dharma attain to worlds free from sorrow.

Vena, the Paramatman, the Soul of the Universe blesses a king who lives in dharma, in whose capital and whose kingdom varnasrama is observed, and the Lord of the yagna is worshipped regularly. And when He, the Lord, blesses a king and his people, nothing is beyond them, for the Devas worship the Lord.

Kshatriya, the brahmanas who offer worship to the Yagna Purusha in your kingdom do so for the welfare of yourself and your people. You should revere them and be thankful for the blessings they draw down upon your land from the God of Gods. To dishonour such men is to dishonour God himself, and that will lead you to doom."

Vena sat glowering down at the Rishis from his throne. He snorted in contempt when the Elder among the Rishis finished speaking. Vena sneered, "You are all fools. Why, you are like a loose woman who waits anxiously for her lover, when it is her husband who feeds her and keeps her. Who is this Yagna Purusha that you worship and honour above your king? Does he protect you or I? Do you live in his kingdom or mine?

Haven't you heard, witless Brahmanas, that Vishnu, Brahma, Siva, Indra, Vayu, Yama, Surya, Kubera, Soma, Bhumi Devi, Agni and Varuna all dwell in the king and in him alone? Your king is every God for you. I, Vena, am every God for you, every God you may have need of. I am the one you should worship. But you are jealous of me and you want to dilute my power.

Brahmanas, I say to you – bring me your worship, to me alone, and you shall prosper in my kingdom. Otherwise, beware of me."

There was untold menace in the last words. Silence fell on the sabha, then the Rishis looked at one another and their Elder said, "He is a demon. He must be killed, or he will ruin the earth. He wants for himself the worship that is due to Narayana. He must die. He must die now!"

The Rishis intoned a deep and deadly humkara, a dreadful HUMmm! like a hissing flame of the apocalypse, and Vena was dead on his throne. Not pausing a moment, the Sages turned and walked away from that city and went back to the jungle from where they had come.

Queen Sunitha was heartbroken, and she preserved her son's body in oils and with mantras.

Some time afterwards, many of those same hermits had bathed in the Saraswati and lounged upon her banks, telling one another legends of the Lord. They saw evil omens appear all around them, and became distraught. They prayed: "The Earth has no king to protect her. May we, who bear no arms, be safe from the terror of thieves and brigands."

Suddenly, they saw a cloud of dust, where a band of thieves plunged across the earth, pillaging it as they pleased, plundering, raping and murdering anyone who dared oppose them. The Munis learnt that without a kshatriya king to protect her, anarchy swept the earth. Outlaws ruled the day and had their way with the people.

Now, the Rishis were powerful enough to stop the bandits with their occult powers. But they saw evil in that method. They also knew that if a brahmana fails to help the afflicted and the desperate, his punya will leak away like water from a pitcher with a hole in it.

They said amongst themselves, "The race of Anga must not end. The earth needs the protection of a kshatriya king."

They went back to the city were they had killed Vena. They demanded to see his body. Then, waving the palace servants and women away, they gathered around the dead kshatriya and began to chant arcane mantras. At the same time, they vigorously kneaded Vena's lifeless thigh with their hands. All at once, a strange dark creature, a homunculus, stood forth from Vena's thigh. In moments, he grew before their eyes and still he was dwarfish. He was black as a crow, his limbs squat and thick, his arms small, his chin out-thrust, his nose flat and his eyes and his hair were the colour of blood.

He stood bowing before the brahmanas and asked them meekly, "Lords, what do want from me? What shall I do?"

They said to him, "Nishida," which meant sit down. Whereupon, Vidura, he was Nishada, and that tribe was his. That brave, wild being took Vena's most terrible sins upon himself, and all the nishadas were outcast and lived in mountains and jungles, hidden from society.

Now, the Rishis kneaded Vena's arms, and twins were born from them, a boy and a girl. The little couple was so radiant that the brahmanas knew at once that here was an amsavatara of the Lord.

The Rishis said, "This boy is the Lord's own incarnation, and this girl child the Devi Lakshmi's. Let the prince be called Prithu, the great, and let this princess be called Archis. They shall be man and wife, and never will this earth know a greater king and queen."

The brahmanas praised him, the gandharvas sang of him, and siddhas poured down petal rains from swarga while apsaras danced to celebrate the birth of Prithu and Archis. The sky echoed with conches, trumpets and drums. All the Devas, Pitrs and Devarishis gathered on high and blessed the two children.

Brahma came to where the two had been born from dead Vena's arms, and he saw the mark of Vishnu on Prithu's right palm, the uncrossed chakra. He saw the sankha on the soles of Prithu's feet, and knew this was certainly the Lord Narayana's amsa. When the divine children were fullgrown, the brahmanas of the earth crowned Prithu king.

Everyone brought gifts and blessings. The rivers came to that ceremony, the seas and mountains, wild creatures of the forest, birds of the air, and great plants that tore up their roots from the deep earth. When the incomparable crown, brought for him by Indra, was set on young Prithu's head and Archis sat beside him on Svayambhuva Manu's hallowed throne, the kshatriya shone like another Agni Deva upon the ancient golden throne that Kubera brought for him.

Varuna brought a pearl-stringed royal parasol, dripping with the sacred water of the ocean, and radiant as a full moon. Vayu brought two brilliant chowries to fan him with. Dharma Deva brought a garland that seemed to embody the glory of Devaloka. Yama, the Lord Death, brought a scintillating and grim sceptre called Sanyamanam, with which Prithu would rule the world.

Brahma brought a subtle kavacha, armour made of Vedic mantras to protect him from every weapon, every spell, from all evil. The Devi Saraswati gave him a priceless and powerful necklace that he would always wear. The Lord Vishnu gave him an amsa of his Sudarshana Chakra, and the Devi Lakshmi blessed him with the greatest wealth and fortune.

The Lord Siva brought Prithu a great weapon – a sword emblazoned with ten crescent moons. Parvati Devi gave him a shield that bore a hundred crescent moons. Soma Deva brought Prithu immortal horses amrita-born, tireless, swifter than the wind. Tvashtar brought him a golden chariot.

Agni Deva gave the king of the earth a magical bow and Surya Deva gave him arrows like his own rays. Bhumi Devi brought Prithu mystic sandals for his feet, which had strange and marvellous powers, as to take him swift as thoughts wherever he wanted. Akasa, the sky, gave him a peerless garland of unfading lotuses.

The gandharvas who fly through the air gave him knowledge of the arts of dancing, singing and of the instruments on which they play their divine music, as well as maya, the power to vanish and reappear at will. The Rishis gave him their invariably potent blessings, and Varuna gave him a tremendous sea conch.

The seas, the rivers and the mountains gave Prithu free passage across the earth, and then the sutas, the magadhas and vandhis began to sing his praises. But Prithu laughed and said, "Sutas, how do you praise me so lavishly when I have done nothing yet to deserve your songs? I beg you, wait until I deserve at least a line, word, of all that you sing! If sing you must, sing of the Lord Vishnu."

Secretly the bards, who felt they must flatter their new monarch, were gratified that he was honest. But they said, "You are Narayana's own amsavatara, and we only praised you as such. The Rishis of the earth have told us to sing your praises."

Prithu said with a smile, "Then tell us what they asked you to say, for I shall know then what is expected of me."

The bards resumed, "Prithu is the greatest upholder of dharma in the world. Even the masters of speech, Brahma and his sons, are hard-pressed to find the words with which to describe his glory. He sets his people firmly on the path of truth. He is the protector of the good and punishes the evil. He bears in his body, latently, the powers of the Lokapalas, the guardians of the earth, to summon whenever the need arises. He is perfectly impartial when he dispenses justice, never punishing the blameless, collecting taxes only so he can administer the kingdom. He releases the wealth that he takes: generously, aptly, even as the Sun evaporates the water of the earth and returns it to the earth as rain, in the proper seasons.

The king is like the Earth herself, always taking upon himself the pain of the distressed. Always patient, he is the most compassionate and forbearing of all. Truly he is Hari who has come to us as a king. He is as handsome as Soma Deva, radiant and charming. Yet, he is inscrutable like Indra, who withholds and sends down the rains, and what he does is beyond the common understanding, unpredictable because it is immaculate. Like Varuna, he is too deep to fathom, as he jealously guards his wealth and treasures, so that the kingdom and its people are strong.

He is the fire born from the arani twig, the sami branch that was Vena. He is powerful past understanding, and invincible to his enemies. You can be next to him, a few feet away, but he is as if he is upon another world. He sees all that goes on in his kingdom, through the eyes of his agents. Yet he is perfectly calm, as if he is indifferent. He is like prana, pervasive. He is like the Atman, beyond change.

He is completely just, and his judgement impeccable. He will never punish someone who is not guilty, and if his own son breaks dharma, he will not spare him. Prithu's sway extends from the Manasottara Mountain across the earth, to every land that the sun illumines with his light. He rules to bring joy to his people, and so they call him Rajan.

He keeps his vow, never breaks his word. He is a friend and protector of brahmanas, a servant of the old, the refuge of all that dwell in his kingdom. He is respectful to those that should be respected, and kind to those that deserve kindness.

He honours other women as he does his own mother and sisters; his wife he treats like half his own person. His subjects are like his children, and those who know the Vedas are his masters. All who live in his kingdom love him as their own, as their life, their soul. And he most of all loves the company of those who are beyond the attachments and bonds of the world.

By his dharma, the rain comes on time and the earth is fertile. But make no mistake, this Rajan, this majestic Prithu, is none other than the Lord Vishnu, sovereign of the three worlds, the antaryamin, the One beyond change. Like the sun, Prithu will traverse the earth and subjugate it, from the Udaya Mountain, with his bow in his hand. Every other king will pay him homage, and he shall be their Chakravarti, their Emperor. Their queens will look up to him as they do Vishnu, and sing his praises."

The sutas paused in their song that they seemed to know so well. After a moment's silence, while mysterious and unworldly light shone upon

Prithu's face, they continued gravely, "Prithu will milk the Earth, when she comes before him as a divine cow. He will level her mountains with the tip of his bow, casually, as if in sport. No evil will resist his advent when he sweeps across the world as a storm of justice.

A hundred Asvamedha yagnas this king of kings will perform at the source of the Saraswati, and bless the world a hundred times. When he undertakes the hundredth sacrifice, Indra will steal his horse away. Then, Sanatkumara will appear to Prithu in his garden, and teach him the Brahmavidya, the final knowledge that will set him free."

Thus the sutas, the magadhas and vandins ended their prophetic song of a matchless kshatriya born from a dead king's arms.

Prithu said, "All this I will strive to be, yet no man who is humble will allow his own praises to be sung in his presence." '

PRITHU'S ANGER AT THE EARTH

MAITREYA CONTINUED, 'THE EARTH HAD BEEN WITHOUT A KING FOR so long that the brigands, thieves and murderers of the world, who held sway in every part, had reduced the people to a piteous condition. Now, some years after Vena's death, hunger stalked the land.

His people came to Prithu and, showing him their emaciated bodies, said, "Protector of the earth, save us from hunger. The fires in our bellies consume us from within."

Prithu looked inward, into his heart, and saw the cause of the famine. Seeing adharma everywhere, and anarchy, the Earth had withdrawn all her nurture into herself – plants, trees and fruit, even the animals that could become food for men. Prithu quivered with anger. He raised his bow and shot a blistering arrow at the earth. In panic, she took the form of a cow and fled lowing from the king. Her tail raised in terror she ran from him like a doe from a hunter.

His eyes crimson, Vena's son pursued her, with a terrible arrow fixed to his bowstring. She fled to all the corners of the world that she herself was; she fled to all the cardinal points and the intermediate directions. She flew up to swarga and down into patala, she flew across the sky between heaven and earth, and still she saw Prithu behind her, with his bow raised.

Bhumi Devi saw she could not escape from the kshatriya any more than mortals can escape death. She turned, and came before him. She cried, "They call you the Protector. Protect me as well! Why do you want to kill me? I have not sinned. Besides, I am a woman and how can a kshatriya attack a woman, even if she has sinned? You should be compassionate, O King. I support all your subjects. Where will they live if you kill me?"

Prithu said levelly, "You take your share of our sacrifices, but you keep all your wealth for yourself! I will punish you with death. The Lord Brahma has created everything that you hide within yourself for my people to enjoy. But you hoard the wealth that is not yours. If you will not give my people food to eat, I will kill you, Bhumi Devi, and feed them your flesh. A king may kill anyone who oppresses his people, even a woman. As for support for my people, once I have cut you in slivers and fed them your meat, I will support them with my yoga!"

Bhumi Devi trembled before the king who was like Death before her. She folded her hands, and said to him, "I bow to the Lord of Gods, the great Purusha, who created me to be the home of all his creatures! It seems he has come himself to strike me down. In him, whom else, I seek sanctuary. But ah, he is devoted to dharma; how will he kill me?

Vishnu, you lifted me up from the dark sea on your tusks, as the Varaha. You wanted to create life and for me to support it. But today the same Varaha stands before me as Prithu, the kshatriya, and you want to kill me to feed the people of the earth. Lord, not even I can fathom your purposes. You will do as you must and you are the master of the maya that creates and destroys all the living."

She paused and glanced at him out of the corners of her lovely eyes. She saw his lips still quivered with wrath. Certain that her end had come, but determined to use every wile to keep him from killing her, she said softly, "Yet, listen to me if you would, O wisest. I beg you, control your fury and hear what I have to say before you kill me. After Vena's death, evil ones had sway over all my lands and they enjoyed the herbs and plants and other foods that Brahma created for the nurture of his creatures. Only the evil enjoyed the fruits of the earth, O Prithu. Not for the performance of any yagnas were my most precious herbs used anymore, but only for the greed and the power of brigands. So, I swallowed all those herbs and plants, Rajan, to keep them from becoming extinct."

She saw she had his attention, and went on, "But now, I have hidden them within me, away from the sun, the moon, the wind, the subtle light of the stars and the songs of the birds for so long that they have grown weak and withered inside me. There is only one way to bring them forth again. I have come to you as this cow so you can milk me for all the precious green life that I swallowed to keep it safe. Only you can do it, O Kshatriya, only you have the power.

But first we need a calf and a vessel to hold my milk, the milk of the Earth. Level my surfaces so Indra's rains can collect upon me even after he has finished sending them down, and I shall never be left arid. And let the maharishis also milk me for whatever they want. Let all the great milk me, using their own calves, and they shall have whatever their hearts desire from me, all that is most precious to them."

The Earth Goddess fell quiet and Prithu's rage left him like darkness before the sun. His arrow fell from his hand and so did his bow, as that kshatriya was plunged in thought.

Finally he spoke gently to Bhumi Devi, "Mother, we all know about your proverbial patience. It seems that men have injured you so much and so deeply that they have exhausted that patience. I am sorry that I turned my anger on you; you did not deserve it. Mother, I will do as you say, and milk you for all that my people and I need from you."

Prithu made his grandfather Svayambhuva Manu his calf, and he milked Bhumi Devi for the precious, life-giving plants, herbs and foods that she had withdrawn into herself. The world of men had plenty to eat again.

Then the Rishis of the earth made Brihaspati their calf and they drew out the sacred Vedas from Bhumi Devi, into themselves, their hearts, their minds and their senses. The Devas made Indra their calf, and drew a golden chalice of Soma rasa from the Earth, and some milk that made them splendid and vigorous.

The Daityas and Danavas made Prahlada their calf, and milked Bhumi Devi for the wines called sava and asava, filling an iron vessel. The gandharvas and apsaras made Viswavasu their calf and filled the cup made of great lotuses with elven honey, which made them more beautiful than ever, and their voices sweeter than before. They milked divine music from her.

The Pitrs, who preside over the sraddha, made Aryaman their calf and drew milk for themselves in an unbaked earthen vessel. This became their kavya, the food of the manes.

The Siddhas made Kapila their calf. Their chalice was the vault of the sky, and they drew the eight supernatural siddhis from the earth as their milk. Anima and the vidyadharas also used Kapila Vasudeva as their calf, and the milk they drew was the power to fly through the air.

The kimpurushas used Maya Devi as their calf, and drew the magical maya as their milk – the power to become invisible. The yakshas, rakshasas, pisachas and bhutas, who feed on flesh, made the Lord Rudra their calf. Their chalice was a skull and they filled it with wine and blood.

The serpents, lizards and scorpions made Takshaka, the Naga king, their calf, and drew venom as their milk. Their mouths served as their chalice. The herbivores of the world made Nandin their calf, and they drew grass as their milk, into the jungle, which was their chalice. The predators made the lion their calf, and drew down the beasts their prey upon – the deer and the rest – as their milk. The birds of the air made Garuda their calf, and worms, insects and fruit were their milk.

The trees of the world made the nyagrodha, the pipal, their calf, and drew their various juices and their sap of life from the teats of the Earth cow. The mountains made the Himalaya their calf, and milked Bhumi Devi for precious minerals and gems into their ridges and caves.

Thus, all the species, the mobile and stationary ones of the world made their respective lords their calves and milked the Earth as a cow for what was precious to them, and the survival of their kind.

Now Prithu was pleased. All the living had their sustenance again. He stroked Bhumi Devi's head as fondly as he might a daughter's. When Prithu thought of the Earth as his daughter, she was named Prithvi, and has been called that ever since.

Vena's son crushed the peaks of the mountains of the world with the tip of his bow. He filled her canyons and ravines, and made her flat in many places, so his people could live upon her. Seas and lakes formed where he flattened the Earth, as she had wanted. The rains collected in them and men and beasts of the world drank from them.

Prithu was like a father not just to the Earth, but to his people as well. He was their support, giving them the means for their livelihoods. He was the Adiraja, the first true king of men. He made towns and villages for his people to live, and great cities too. He was the first king to do this. The threat from the bandits was quelled, and the men and women of the earth began living in peace and joy under king Prithu,' Maitreya Muni told Vidura in his asrama.

PRITHU'S ASVAMEDHA YAGNAS

VIDURA ASKED, 'TELL ME ABOUT THE HORSE SACRIFICES OF PRITHU, the Great. I have heard that he fell into a contention with Indra.'

Maitreya said, 'When Prithu had milked the Earth and established peace and safety for his people, he had himself consecrated as Sacrificer in the land where the Saraswati turns and flows east. It is here that the other celestial river, the Dhrishadvati, joins the golden river. The two enclose a most sacred land that the Devas called Brahmavarta. Prithu wanted to perform a hundred asvamedha yagnas to bless the earth, all that dwelt upon her and his subjects.

At Brahmavarta, Prithu began his hundred asvamedhas. Bhumi Devi became a cow once more, and she gave Prithu all that he needed as her milk. She gave him havis, milk, butter, ghee and everything else he wanted to complete his sacrifices. The rivers of the earth flowed into his immense yagnashala; some flowed with sugarcane juice, others with the juice of the grape. The trees of Brahmavarta bore fruit full of nectarine honey; the seven seas brought Prithu the most precious jewels in creation, and the mountains of the world brought him the four vital foods.

Every guest invited to the sequence of asvamedhas brought treasures as gifts for the great king, that incomparable kshatriya. Brahma, Vishnu and Siva attended Prithu's unprecedented yagna, as did the Lokapalas, the greatest Rishis from Devaloka, the gandharvas and apsaras. Everything was as it should be, and ninety-nine horses were sacrificed before the holy fire. But now, suddenly, there was someone who grew unbearably jealous of

Prithu, a Deva who smouldered with an envy he could not contain, and anxiety he could not master.

The only other sovereign in the three worlds who had ever performed a hundred asvamedha yagnas was Indra, king of the Devas. Now he felt terribly threatened; he was afraid that Prithu would usurp his position as king of Devaloka. Also, he could not bear to hear Prithu's praises sung; he could not stand the thought that a mortal of the earth was his equal, perhaps his superior.

Indra disguised himself as a pashandi, and stole the hundredth horse intended for Prithu's sacrifice. As soon as the theft was discovered Prithu's son prepared to recover the horse. The Maharishi Atri pointed out the thief to the prince, the thief who flew away softly, swiftly, across the firmament. Prithu's son flew after him, and when he was near enough and his arrow drawn back to his ear, ready to fly, he saw the horse thief was a sadhu, a holy man who wore saffron robes, whose face was masked by ashes. The boy could not loose his arrows at a Sage, and he flew back to his father's yagnashala.

But Atri cried to him, "Don't let the disguise deceive you! The horse-thief is Indra, and envy burns his heart. Don't hesitate; kill him. He deserves to die."

Again, the prince gave chase to the divine thief. Indra grew afraid and vanished, leaving the horse behind. Prithu's son returned triumphant, with the horse. Everyone was so delighted, they called that prince Vijitasva from then.

But Indra was not to be so easily outdone. He caused a sudden darkness to fall over the yagnashala, and stole away the horse, with its golden chain and its wooden ring, the chasala. Again, Atri pointed Indra out to Vijitasva and again the prince flew after the thief. As he neared the fleeing Deva, Vijitasva saw him as a Kapalaka. He carried a skull in his hands and a khatvanga, a club with a skull on its head. The prince hesitated again to kill a holy man.

But Atri Muni cried to Vijitasva, "Kill him! He is just a common thief."

Vijitasva roared and drew back his bowstring with an awesome arrow fitted to it. Instantly Indra abandoned the horse and his Kapalaka's guise and became invisible. Once more, the prince brought his father's sacrificial horse back to the yagnashala.

But Indra came again and again, and each time he came as a holy man. As a digambara he came, as a red-robed monk, and other heretics who follow paths other than that of the Veda. Each was an example to men, and in the later ages they would assume similar hypocrite appearances to deceive the naïve people of the earth.

Finally, when Indra had come and gone a few times, Prithu himself grew furious. Though he was the sacrificer and forbidden violence, he picked up his bow and aimed an astra at the Deva king. But his ritviks, the brahmanas, cried, "Only the yagnapashu can be killed at a sacrifice! Stay your hand. Indra has lost his glory by his envy. We will summon him here with our mantras, and offer him to the fire as your sacrificial animal."

Prithu lowered his bow and the priests began to pour oblations on to the sacred agni and to chant arcane mantras. But then, Brahma appeared before them in a mass of light. The Creator of the worlds said, "Indra is Yagna himself, and all the Devas to whom you are offering your oblations are Indra's amsas. Indra is jealous of Prithu and of his own fame. But he has behaved like a thief today, and though Prithu has completed only ninety-nine asvamedhas, he shall have greater honour than Indra, in swarga, bhumi and patala. But let this go no further, lest Indra support the heretics of the world and the sanatana dharma leaves the earth forever."

This would certainly happen in the kali yuga, anyway, but that time was still far away.

Brahma turned to Prithu, "The king of Bhumi and the king of Devaloka are both amsas of the Lord Vishnu. You must not keep anger in your heart against Indra, who is your own self."

But Prithu said, "My yagna, which I swore an oath to complete, is unfulfilled."

Brahma said, "The Devas are stubborn. Heresies will rule the earth if you persist with your hundredth asvamedha. I beg you, relent for the sake of the people of the earth. Forgive Indra, and let him remain the only king to perform a hundred asvamedhas."

Prithu did not perform the hundredth yagna. He worshipped all the Gods, and they duly blessed him. Prithu performed the avabritha snana, the closing ablution. The brahmanas who had been the ritviks at Prithu's unequalled sacrifice all blessed him.

Vishnu Narayana was pleased with Prithu, and said, "Look Kshatriya, Indra is ashamed and has come to ask your pardon. Forgive him now, and be his friend so there can be amity and harmony between Bhumi and Devaloka."

Prithu hesitated, and Vishnu said, "The greatest men harbour no anger towards even those that offend them. The Atman is beyond every slight and offence, O King. If maya still deludes you, all your yagnas, your fine karma and your long service of your elders have been in vain.

The wise man has no attachment for anything other than his soul. He dwells in me, and is unaffected by the samsara that surrounds him. He is always serene and forgiving, seeing all beings and creatures as part of himself, and so he is never offended by the worst that anyone does to him. He sees pleasure and pain as being identical, and identically powerless to affect him. He sees all men as being equal.

The great king is only concerned about the protection of his people. That is his dharma and nothing else has any real significance for him. Soon, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara will be here to see you. There is no one as virtuous as you are, great Prithu. Ask me for any boon you want."

With tears in his eyes to hear the Lord himself ask for a favour, Prithu immediately embraced Indra. And the Deva, in return, felt so ashamed of his pettiness that he touched Prithu's feet! Now, Prithu prostrated himself at Vishnu's feet, and bhakti swelled in him like a raging sea. Vishnu prepared to leave that yagnashala, but seeing the yearning and the love in Prithu's eyes, he stayed. Prithu stood blinded by his tears and speechless for love before his Lord, the Blue God. He stood with folded hands, clasping Hari to him tightly with his mind.

At last, he wiped his tears and saw in Vishnu's eyes that he was dissatisfied. Vishnu stood with his hand on golden, magnificent Garuda's shoulder, stroking his feathers. Most unexpectedly, he stood with his feet resting upon the earth, to show Prithu his favour.

Prithu said softly, "Bless me with a thousand ears to listen to your praises being sung. Bless me not with any boon that other men seek, why, not with moksha even, but bless me with bhakti. True bhakti contains nirvana within it. Lord, the nectar from your feet like lotuses is the wisdom and the bliss that surges in the hearts of the greatest saints and flows from their mouths as scripture. This is the poetry that brings men who have strayed back to the high path to their own souls.

As the Devi Lakshmi is, Lord, I want to be your devotee. Grant me just that, nothing else. And may there never be envy between all of us, who vie for your favour, your love. There is no other boon I want from you, O Devadeva, God of Gods."

Blue Narayana smiled and said, "Prithu, your bhakti will help you cross the sea of maya. Your devotion will set you free. As you have always done, listen to your heart, because it is there that you will know my will. Live by my will and you will find happiness here and hereafter."

Vishnu laid his palm on Prithu's head, and mounting Garuda, flew up into the sky and vanished as quickly as a thought. The Devas, Pitrs, Rishis, gandharvas, siddhas, charanas, nagas, kinnaras, apsaras, the mortal men, the birds and animals, who had attended Prithu's ninety-nine asvamedhas received their share of the precious offerings and left the yagnashala.

Vishnu left, taking, as it were, Prithu, the Rajarishi's, heart and mind with him. Slowly, the matchless kshatriya and his queen Archis returned to their capital and their palace.

Prithu's city was adorned with garlands of flowers and strings of pearls, with silken drapes and arches of solid gold. Earthen pots containing holy water from the greatest rivers and seas stood at every street-corner and doorstep. Incense burned everywhere, enveloping the city in a fragrance of swarga. Water scented with sandal and aguru had been sprinkled everywhere. The streets were colourfully decorated with rice grains, flowers and brilliant kumkum, with fruit, and tender barley. Plantain stumps and leaves, young areca nut palms, wreaths of mango leaves and the leaves of other trees decked the pillars, arches and doorways. As dusk fell, a sea of lamps gave out their soft, warm light.

Carrying lamps in their hands, his people came to greet Prithu when he returned after his yagna. Exquisite young girls were at the head of the party that received the king. Their earrings and necklaces sent golden shafts to mingle with the last rays of the setting sun. Music was in the air, and the girls danced in the streets for joy at the homecoming of their king. Amidst abandoned celebrations, the feverish beating of drums and the chanting of Vedic hymns, Prithu entered his palace. And he was an exemplary sovereign of the earth,' said Maitreya to Vidura," Suka Deva tells Parikshit,' the Suta says to Saunaka and his Rishis.

Romaharshana's son continues, 'Suka went on, "Vidura said, 'Muni, I have heard that even today the grace that the earth enjoys, and her kings enjoy, is because of Prithu, and what he did. Tell me more about his rule, O Maitreya.'

Maitreya resumed, 'Prithu lived in the Doab, the land between the Ganga and the Yamuna. He enjoyed only such pleasures as came to him because of his past punya, never wishing to add to them, but only exhaust them. Over the seven island continents – Jambu, Plaksha, Salmali, Kusa, Krauncha, Saka and Pushkara – he ruled, unopposed anywhere. All men and all creatures were his subjects, save the brahmanas and the worshippers of Hari, whose allegiance is only to Narayana himself.

Once Prithu held another great yagna, to which all the Devas and Rishis and the kings of the worlds came. When they had all been received and honoured, and seated in his sabha, Prithu stood up and he was like the full moon among the stars.

He was handsome past describing, and fair. He was powerfully built, with long arms that hung almost to his knees. His eyes were the hue of the red lotus that blooms on pools and lakes in the deepest jungles. His chest was deep and strong, his belly was shaped like a pipal leaf. His thighs were like pillars of gold. His shoulders were round, his teeth bright and even, and his smile enchanting.

Prithu's hair was fine and curly, black and glossy. His throat was marked with three lines like a conch shell. He wore priceless silk around his waist and the skin of a black antelope across his chest. For the yagna, he wore no ornaments. He was absolutely regal and gentle. He looked around him with serene, loving eyes. With a tuft of kusa grass in his hands, he spoke to the gathering in his sabha. His voice was soft, cultured, yet reverberant: deep and enthralling.

Prithu said, "May all that is auspicious be with you, who have been kind enough to grace my yagna. I have been made king here to rule and to uphold dharma, to protect my people, to provide them with a livelihood, and to control them in their several walks of life. I pray that I may find heaven for myself by performing my dharma.

The king that takes taxes from his people without showing them the way to their salvation shares the sins of the darkness in which he leaves them. He forsakes his own fortune. So I say to you, my people, live by the dharma into which you are born. Give your mind and heart to the Blue Lord, and do your duty without wavering or straying. Do your dharma and you will find with each day that your bhakti and your desire to do more will flow like the Ganga does from the Lord Narayana's toe.

O Pitrs, Devas and Maharishis, I propose to you that from now the doer of any karma, his Guru and the one who consents in the karma shall equally share the fruits of that deed in this world and the next. There are realms beyond this earth, full of enchanted moonlight, where the punyavan goes to enjoy his punya, in a body that also seems made of magic moonlight, so soft and radiant it is. And this desire to always serve Hari washes away a man's sins even as the Ganga does – the accumulated sins of all his past lives.

Vishnu's devotees develop occult powers, siddhis of detachment and realisation, and they do not return to this world of suffering, this samsara. Do as much as you can, as well as you can, and ask Him to bless what you do. You will achieve whatever you want, and much more than you ever imagined you would.

Narayana is pure knowledge, pure consciousness beyond all the qualities. He is without attributes, yet he manifests himself in this world as the yagna, as dharma, as mantra, yantra, agnistoma, and indeed as all this maya. He pervades everything. But he is always free and transcendent, and it is to that condition the rest of us must aspire, with bhakti.

The brahmanas are the gurus of this world, and by revering them and seeking their company, we find Vishnu's grace. Brahmanas are the custodians of the Veda, which mirrors the universe. They carry that profound secret within themselves, in their minds, and they are the chalices of all that is sacred. I bend my crown at the feet of these gurus, these holy ones. I wear their padadhuli, the dust from their feet, on my head – because that mystic dust removes all my sins and makes the finest qualities grow in me. Affluence and accomplishments follow a man whose sins are washed away. Wisdom dawns on him. He looks upon character as his greatest wealth, to the company of the elderly as his greatest treasure. May the race of brahmanas bless me!" said Prithu feelingly.

The Devas, the Pitrs and the Rishis all blessed Prithu. They said, "Vena will find salvation from his sins because of his son. He will escape hell just as Hiranyakashyapu did, by his son's punya."

Prithu's subjects cried, "Greatest Kshatriya, long may you live, for we the people of the earth feel as if Vishnu himself ruled us. You show us how to return to the paths of salvation. You show us the way from the darkness to light. You support the brahmanas who are the holders of the earth, and they bless you and us, for being your subjects."

At that moment, four Rishis, who shone like small suns, arrived in Prithu's sabha. They descended by the ancient pathways of the Sages, straight out of heaven. Prithu saw they were Sanaka and his brothers, and ran out to greet them with padya and arghya. He brought them into his court, and sat them in places of honour at the head of the sabha. The king sprinkled the water with which he washed their feet over his head. Prithu seemed dazzled by their presence, intoxicated, and he stood gazing at them, his eyes and his heart full. The four Rishis looked like four flames of Agni Deva.

Prithu said, "What great punya I have that you have appeared in my sabha today, you whom not the great Munis see after lives spent in tapasya! You range the worlds, invisibly, helping the people of the earth to find their proper way; yet no one sees you. Welcome, a thousand times welcome, O Masters of the Spirit! I have no doubt you have come here to show me the way out of this samsara, to bring me to nirvana."

The four smiled to listen to the king. Then Sanatkumara said, "Prithu, your love for the Lord Vishnu is a legend across the three worlds. Your bhakti is renowned, O Kshatriya. Even as the fire kindled with the arani twig consumes the wood it was kindled with, bhakti consumes the bhakta, transforming him. The fire of bhakti consumes the sheath of the panchabhutas that keeps the Atman apart from the Paramatman. When that sukshma rupa, the spirit body, is burnt away in the fire of bhakti, all that remains is the Soul, and the bhakta is as one who has woken from a dream into reality. He no longer sees the shadows that ruled his dream.

During the dream of samsara the senses and the objects of their desires rule a man, and deprive him of his reason. He forgets who he truly is – the sacred and pristine atman. Wisdom departs with memory, and every trivial thing on earth becomes dearer to the jiva than his immortal Self. The Atman is hidden, veiled by avidya, by the darkness of ignorance. Myriad insane attachments make him their slave. He is lost in the deep night of samsara, a victim of his baser nature.

Every man must see the four purusharthas clearly before him – the four aims of life: dharma, artha, kama and moksha. When a soul loses sight of these, he roams the lower regions, the hells, blindly, treading a dark way from ruin to ruin. The security he seeks, relentlessly, is never found, not until he turns his face towards the light again and walks the straight and perhaps long path towards the highest and final goal again – the path to moksha.

O Kshatriya, you are not distinct from the Lord Vishnu, the antaryamin. Only that maya deludes you. But let Hari be the boat in which you cross over the sea of samsara, patrolled by six deadly crocodiles – kama, krodha, lobha, mada, moha and matsara: lust, anger, greed, conceit, delusion and envy.

There are those who try to find their way across this dangerous sea with yoga, by themselves. Often, such men come to grief. But he who takes the Lord Narayana as his refuge, his boat and boatman, never fails to find his way to freedom and to eternal bliss."

Prithu said, "Greatest Rishis, long ago, when I was a boy, the Lord Hari blessed me. It seems you have come now to fulfil that blessing. All that I own already belongs to you – my life, my queen, my sons, my palace, my city, my kingdom, my army, my treasury, everything. My lords, I offer you all these once more. For, more than anyone else, those that know the Vedas deserve to rule and to command great armies. My debt to you, the world's debt to you, is always inestimable."

Sanatkumara called Prithu to him, and whispered a secret path to nirvana in his ear. Then, Prithu publicly worshipped the four Sages, and blessing him, they rose bodily into the sky, while the people watched them in awe.

After the Rishis' visit, Prithu turned his mind and all his energies inward; he ardently sought the Brahman within himself. He continued to perform his dharma as king, but he remained unattached in the midst of whatever he did. He was free from ahamkara and free from desire.

Prithu sired five princes on his wife Archis. They were splendid boys as noble as their father, and they were called Vijitasva, Dhumrakesha, Haryaksha, Dravina and Vrika.

Prithu was the perfect king. He was gentle as Soma, bright as Surya, invincible as Agni, indomitable as Indra, patient as Bhumi Devi, like Swarga to his subjects, showering upon them anything they wished for. He was as deep and inscrutable as Varuna, magnificent as Himavan, as firm as Meru, as just and fearsome as Yama, as wealthy as Kubera, as strong as and as ubiquitous as Vayu, as irresistible as Siva, as handsome as Kama, as brave as a lion, as loving and fatherly as Manu, as regal as Brahma, as wise as Brihaspati, as restrained as Vishnu. And he was the most devout man alive. His fame entered the hearts of women even as Rama's fame did the hearts of the Rishis of the world.

Prithu was the founder of cities and towns, of all human habitations; he was the father of agriculture. His was the archetypal, original reign. But one day, when an aeon had passed, Prithu knew that he had grown old, and the time Sanatkumara had spoken about was upon him – the time to seek his peace, the time to seek his soul.

Prithu entrusted his kingdom, the very earth, to his sons, and taking only his wife Archis with him, he retired to the forest. The Earth wept like a daughter at her father's funeral. The people were as downcast as children who had lost their father.

Prithu began to live the life of a vanaprastha. He kept the vows prescribed for one as zealously as he had ruled his kingdom. He lived in an austere asrama, eating only fruit, roots, and dry leaves. He plunged himself into his tapasya; quickly he subsisted on just a few mouthfuls of water, and then imbibing just air.

Came the searing summer, and the Kshatriya Muni undertook the panchagni sadhana. He sat naked on a rock and lit four fires around himself; the fifth was the blazing sun above him.

Came the monsoon, and he sat exposed to the torrents of the sky, drenched to the bone, never moving a hand even to wipe his face. In the biting winter, he stood neck deep in the icy water of a mountain stream. He slept on bare ground, not covering himself even with bark or leaves.

He practised mowna, silence, for long periods, and spoke most sparingly when he did at all. He kept strict celibacy and mastered his breath with pranayama. Prithu dedicated all his penance to Krishna. Slowly, his tapasya came to a point of perfection, when hardly any distinction remained between himself and his meditation, the dhyana and the dhyani. He burnt all his karma, punya and paapa, to ashes with the subtle fires of his tapasya. His mind grew purer every day. With pranayama, he quieted the six passions, and the bonds of vasana fell away from him.

Prithu set foot on the hermetic way that Sanatkumara had once revealed to him; he turned all his thought towards the Purusha, the antaryamin.

With each day now, he approached nearer his goal – the Atman. Prithu's mind brimmed with just the sattva guna; all tamas and rajas had left him. Vast, radiant gyana unfurled in him, bloom of a thousand petals. Powerful siddhis awakened in him. He wielded his knowledge like a sword, and cut away the sheath of the jiva that still encased his spirit. He severed the vestigial knot of ahamkara that still bound him to time, and touched him with doubt and anxiety.

The last thong that tied him to his body fell away; he felt mystic union with his soul. Prithu realised who he was. The last desires, for occult powers, were swept away from him. He ceased all ado, even the effort to become free. He was perfectly content, perfectly still. Immense tides of bhakti for Krishna surged in his liberated heart. They absorbed him entirely. The tides became the ocean of Brahman, and Prithu, like the salt doll that sought to plumb that ocean, dissolved into it.

The mystic serpent, the kundalini that slept coiled in the muladhara chakra, began its final journey up the stem of his spine. With his vital breath, he drew it up and up. At each chakra it came to, that serpent shakti paused – at the manipura, the manas, the anahata, the vishuddha and the ajna chakra between his eyebrows. Ever so slowly, he drew that shakti up into the final chakra, the brahmarandhra in his brain, lotus of a thousand petals, and up through the aperture in the crown of his head, through which the soul escapes the body.

He merged the element of wind inside his body with the universal Vayu, the solid elements in his body with Prithvi, the empty spaces in his body with Akasa, and the fluids in his body with universal Water. Earth became water; water became fire; fire became wind; wind became cosmic ether. Prithu contemplated the process, and that dhyana is called laya chintana – meditating upon the process of dissolution.

Then, he absorbed his mind into the indriyas, and their lords; he dissolved the senses into the subtle elements from which they had originated. He meditated upon all these and his ego, ahamkara, as dissolving into the Mahat Tattva, the Cosmic Intelligence. The king merged the Mahat, the field of all the gunas, into the jiva, whose source is Maya. Still a jiva himself, Prithu used his gyana and vairagya to cast Maya away from himself, and lost himself in the Brahman.

Archis had followed Prithu to the forest. She served him like a slave, and grew thin as a twig from their new life of extreme austerity. But she was radiant being near him; she shone at his touch. Now she saw he had become utterly lifeless and she sobbed for a while. Then she bathed in the river and offered her husband's spirit tarpana. She piled a pyre with dry branches and somehow lifted him onto it. The Devas flew down from their lofty realms, and stood around that simple pyre.

Archis set fire to dry wood, and circled the burning thing thrice with folded hands. Then she walked into the blaze and became ashes with Prithu, the Great. A thousand Goddesses of the air sang her praises as she committed sati; they flung down petal storms on golden Mandara where Prithu had attained mahasamadhi. The sky echoed with the song of numberless unearthly voices and instruments.

The Devis of the sky said, "Look at Archis, the perfect wife, who served her husband as Lakshmi does Narayana. See how she rises above our realms!"

The spirit of Archis passed the realms of Devaloka and continued to ascend, until she reached her husband Prithu, who had found the highest world of all for himself. And that, friend Vidura, is the story of Prithu, king of kings, who milked the Earth for her treasures. Only the greatest Rishis attain Prithu's realm.

Yet, they say that he who listens devoutly, carefully to the legend of Prithu, with all its wisdom and hidden meanings, finds great punya for himself. It is a magical story. A brahmana who studies Prithu's tale becomes a master of the Veda, the kshatriya becomes lord of the earth, a vaishya the leader of his people and a sudra becomes a Suta, foremost of his people.

I have heard that men or women who have no children and hear this tale three times are blessed with sons and daughters. The poor become rich by listening to it, an obscure man achieves fame, and a fool becomes a scholar. The legend of Prithu blesses the one that hears it with long life, wealth, wisdom, and keeps the sins of the kali yuga far from him. Those that hear it with faith surely achieve the four purusharthas – dharma, artha, kama and, finally, moksha, as well.

Even today, kings who want to conquer other kingdoms always have Prithu's story narrated to them before they set out. And they find that their enemies receive them with tribute! Just as the kings of the earth did Prithu. And surely, though this tale is full of wonderful power to bless whoever hears it intently with treasures of the earth, most of all it is a legend of a man who aspired to Bramavidya, to the final Liberation. And to this day, this story has the power to dissolve a man's worldly attachments and light the lamps of true wisdom in his heart.

The Lord Vishnu blesses those who hear about Prithu, the Great, and they become the Blue One's bhaktas and find heaven for themselves,' said Maitreya, friend of all the living to Vidura, the seeker.

THE SONS OF PRITHU

VIDURA ASKED, 'MAHAMUNI, TELL ME ABOUT PRITHU'S SONS, AND HOW they ruled after their father's time.'

'Prithu's eldest son Antardhana, who became known as Vijitasva after his father's asvamedha yagnas, was a great sovereign upon the earth, an Emperor, a king of kings. He loved his brothers and gave them vast lands, each one, to rule over.

The eastern quarter he gave his brother Haryaksha. He gave the south to his brother Dhumrakesha. He gave the west to his brother Vrika and the north to Dravina. From Indra, Vijitasva had the power to move about invisibly. For this he was called Antardhana. Upon his wife Sikhandini, Antardhana sired three noble princes, called Pavaka, Pavamana and Shuci. These were once gods of fire, born as men because Vasishta had once cursed them. They practised yoga during their mortal lives, as penance for their crime against that Rishi, and became gods again.

Vijitasva married a second queen, Nabhasvati. On her, he begot Havirdhana. This was an extraordinarily gentle prince, who saw kingship as a cruel way of life since it involved meting out punishments and levying taxes. He turned his entire life into a long tapasya, and realised his Atman with immaculate dhyana. Havirdhana fathered six sons on his queen Havirdhani – Barhisad, Gaya, Shukla, Krishna, Satya and Jitavrata.

The eldest prince Barhisad was a master of yagnas. Indeed, he performed so many of them, one following another, each yagnashala next to the previous one, that the earth was covered by kusa grasses from his endless sacrifices, and all their ends pointed east. For this, he was called Prachinabarhis.

Brahma asked Prachinabarhis to marry Varuna's daughter Shatadruti. She was hardly more than a girl when the king took her for his wife, but she was the most beautiful woman in the three worlds. As Barhisad led her around the sacred fire, Agni was besotted by her! Devas, Asuras, gandharvas, siddhas, men and nagas were all captivated by Shatdruti, and followed her as in a dream, wherever she walked, her anklets chiming.

Prachinabarhis begot ten sons on his incomparable queen. Those ten looked exactly alike, wore the same clothes and ornaments, and they were all called Prachetas. They were deeply religious, and knew the Dharmashastras like the palms of their hands. Their father commanded them to have sons, and they plunged down into the realm of their grandsire Varuna, to perform a tapasya to become fathers themselves. They worshipped the Lord of yagnas, Vishnu Narayana, for ten thousand years, with their breath restrained and their minds controlled. It was the Lord Siva, whom they met on their way to the ocean, who blessed them and taught them the Vishnumantra that they chanted ceaselessly.'

Vidura wanted to know, 'How did Siva meet the Prachetases? I have heard it is more than difficult for embodied beings to encounter the Lord Rudra.'

Maitreya said, 'When their father ordered them to go forth and procreate, the Prachetases took his blessing and set out towards the west, and the ocean. On their way, they saw a great lake, barely smaller than a sea. Its water was as clear as the hearts of the enlightened, and all kinds of fish swam and frolicked in it. Treasures of blue and red lotuses, which unfurl variously, by day, by night, at dawn and twilight, covered the surface of the lake, as did golden and indigo blooms.

The songs of water birds echoed all around, and duck, teal, swan, goose, ibis, pelican, cormorant, stork and crane swarmed on the water and on the banks of the lake. Wonderful trees, out of dreams and legends, fringed the limpid water. A breeze that was so fragrant that it must have blown straight down from heaven murmured through the branches and leaves. The princes stood transfixed when their heard unearthly instruments and voices raised in song. There were gandharvas singing in the trees!

Suddenly, the ten young kshatriyas saw Siva emerge from the lake with his ganas surrounding him. His skin was like molten gold, his throat was a vivid blue, a third eye slumbered in his forehead, and thick strands of jata hung down below his shoulders. A great serpent adorned his neck like an incredible necklace or garland. And his smile lit the sylvan place like a full moon. The kinnaras and gandharvas who sang his praises, of which he is so fond, fell silent when they saw the Prachetases, who stood gaping at the Lord incredulously, hardly believing their fortune.

Siva said gently, "Sons of Barhisad, I know where you are going and I have come to bless you. I know that you worship Vishnu, who is dearer to me than anyone else. Why, you might say that he and I are one." His smile was wide, as he paused a moment, then continued more seriously. "But sons of Prachinabarhis, I have come here to teach you a secret mantra that is higher than every other."

He beckoned for them to come close to him, and whispered the sacred, hermetic words to them. This was the Rudra Gita, Siva's own song to worship Vishnu Narayana. The incantation begins thus:

Vasudevaya Visvaprabodhaya Hrishikesendriyatmane; Paramahamsayah Purnayah Nibhritatmane.

When he had taught the Prachetases the Rudra Gita, Siva vanished before their eyes with all the magical folk who had been with him, as if he had never been there at all. The princes stood for a long time, stunned with rapture and quivering. Slowly, then, they collected themselves and set out again for the ocean. Arriving on the shore of their grandsire, they worshipped him, and then entered his waters, in which they submerged themselves for ten thousand years, chanting the Rudra Gita without pause.

Meanwhile, Narada Muni arrived in Prachinabarhis' court, and said to him, "Kshatriya, what beatitude do you hope to achieve by performing these endless rituals? Not from such karma is the final bliss to be had, which removes sorrow at its very root."

The king, who was weary of his own rituals, said, "My mind is absorbed by my yagnas. I have lost sight of everything else. Muni, the man who lives only for his wife and his children is a fool, who deludes himself and comes to a sorry end. I believe in these yagnas, that they will liberate me one day."

Narada laughed. "Kshatriya you have slaughtered thousands of living creatures to feed your yagnas. Look at these countless cows that wait for you beyond death, to gore you again and again with their horns, to have revenge for the brutal way in which you killed them."

Narada led the king out onto a terrace. The Muni made a mystic mudra with his hands and the king saw the hosts of spirit animals waiting beyond death to have their revenge on him. He trembled where he stood.

Narada said, "Listen to the story of the ancient king Puranjana. It has some bearing on your own life. Puranjana was a great and renowned king of yore. He had a friend called Avijnata, dearer to him than his life, albeit he may not always have realised this fact. Avijnata was a strange being, whose whereabouts and activities were always shrouded in mystery. He only appeared when he was remembered, and no one knew where he went or stayed otherwise.

But it was well know that Puranjana and Avijnata were inseparables, always to be found in each other's company. But time passed, and the king grew terribly restless. He decided he would wander the length and breadth of the Holy Land in quest of a worthwhile kingdom and a city he could rule. Avijnata warned him that this was a pointless and dangerous enterprise, but Puranjana would not listen to him. The kshatriya set out, leaving his friend behind, his friend who was closer to him than his very breath.

Far and wide Puranjana ranged, but he did not find the city he was looking for; it seemed that no such place existed. All the kingdoms and cities he came to, he found unsatisfactory and, inevitably, left them behind. Finally one day, as the sun was setting, he came to a plateau on the southern foothills of the Himalaya, and saw there a city that arrested him, that took his breath away. It could have been straight out of his deepest dream – this surely was the city he had been searching for all these years.

A deep moat of the clearest blue water he had ever seen ringed that elegant city. Lofty ramparts guarded it, with watchtowers punctuating their interminable length. Nine great gates led into it. Lovely gardens sprawled across its expanse. Great mansions lined its wide streets, all of them with golden, silver and iron crests. Their walls and floors were paved liberally with sapphires, chrysoberyl, pearls, emeralds and rubies. Some walls and ceilings were single slabs of the finest crystal.

Surrounding that city, which was as wonderful as the legendary subterranean city of the Nagas, city of every pleasure, were gardens with trees in them that Puranjana had never seen before – trees that grew only in Devaloka. In their branches was an extravagance of birds and bees, singing and humming in ecstasy. A pool brimming with lotuses sparkled by the light of the dying sun.

Inside the great gates were colourful lively bazaars, and numerous houses of pleasure, notably gambling houses, all finely built, and marked by their resonant coral pillars, draped with rich silk. Everywhere bright flags flew in the scented breeze that blew through the aisles of the enchanted city, carrying fine spray from the fountains that adorned its main avenues and from the pool outside. The songs of koyals warbled at Puranjana from the garden, calling him irresistibly.

Like a man in a dream, he walked into the garden and saw tiger and deer lying together in peace, the predator calmed of his bloodlust by the magic of this place, and his prey of its fear. There was no hunt here, no violence, just peace. As Puranjana walked to the lake breathing the scents of a thousand flowers, he saw another sight that made him stop still, and stare.

She was young, barely sixteen, but she was dark, beautiful and seductive past reason. He felt sure that she was no woman of this earth but an apsara (at least a nymph), if not a Devi, a Goddess. Her eyes, her lips, her face, her breasts, her hips, her waist slim as a reed – all conspired to make the blood course in his body. He had seen many women in his time, but none had touched him with such absolute desire.

He saw that ten noble servants walked with her, and each of these had a harem of a hundred women following him. Every woman of that multitude was a beauty. But strangest of all was the guardian who went before the young woman – it was an immense, glossy, five-headed serpent.

Staring at her, transfixed, he saw her eyelashes fluttered like a butterfly's wings. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and that look was ravishing past reason. She gave a small sigh that made her young breasts heave in the most fetching way. She worried the silk cloth that covered them, and he saw their velvet skin in a searing flash. Now she paused, and her train with her, and he realised that she wanted him to approach her, to speak to her. He saw she, too, was perhaps attracted to him; he saw a faint smile flicker on her lush lips.

Helplessly, Puranjana went up to her. He breathed, 'Tell me who you are! Are you Dharma's wife Hri? Or Siva's Bhavani? Are you the Devi Saraswati looking for Brahma? Or perhaps you are Hari's Lakshmi? For beauty like yours cannot be just of the earth. But where is the lotus in your hand, if you are Sri Lakshmi? Besides, your feet touch the ground, so must indeed be of this world. Ah, I have never seen anyone like you before. Will you be my wife, enchantress?'

He paused, breathlessly, and looked around at her uncanny retinue. 'Who are these friends that serve you? These ten men and their hundred women each? Who is this great naga? How do you tolerate its presence so near you?'

She smiled, ah, so sweetly at him now. She said in her breathy voice that contained a world of promises, 'Mighty stranger, the truth is I do not know who I am or who created me. All I know is that I belong to this city of the nine gates. I have always lived here, and these friends watch over me. I do not know who built this city. The snake is also my guardian; he stays awake while I sleep, to see that no harm comes to me.'

She paused and her gaze roved frankly over him. She said, 'But I am so fortunate that you have come to my city! I can see you are a wise man, and that you have come looking for pleasure. Warrior, there is no pleasure that you will not have in my city. My friends and I will see to it. We will satisfy your every desire, whatever it might be. I will gladly be your wife, and you shall become the lord of this city. For a hundred years you will enjoy every pleasure known to the gods and to men.'

Again she paused and gazed deeply into his eyes, his very soul, it seemed to him. 'I can see that you are not the sort of man who is overly concerned about tomorrow, or about death or salvation. You are not an anxious man, but one who lives for his pleasures, who seizes the moment, the day. Ah, there is nothing as wonderful as making love. I want you, Kshatriya, and I can see that you also desire me.

My city is called Bhogavati. Come into my city with me, and we will live happily within its nine gates for a hundred years.'

Willingly Puranjana went with her. When he asked her name, all she would say is, 'I have no name, but call me Puranjani from now since I belong to you.'

She led him to her opulent apartment, and without delay they fell to making love. Then on, he stayed with her and she encouraged his every appetite. At times, Puranjani would call her attendants and their women to join Puranjana and herself in sweet, shameless orgies. Every now and again, he would venture out through one of the nine gates to the magic city, and indulge himself in the country into which each one led. Seven of these gates were situated high up at the front of the city, and two were down below.

It was a life of uninterrupted pleasure and gratification. It was a long swoon of the senses. Puranjani became Puranjana's mistress in more than just lovemaking. He lost himself so much in her that he began to mimic her every mood, her every mannerism. It was as if he abandoned his own former identity, and assumed a new one – hers. He would not let her out of his sight for a moment.

When she drank wine, so did he; and he would get drunk and make wild love to her. When she ate, so did he, even chewing his food exactly as she did hers. At times, she would start singing for no apparent reason, and then he would begin singing too, tunelessly. At other times, it seemed that a fathomless sorrow possessed her, and she would sob piteously for hours. At these times, he would sit mournfully beside her, holding her hand, and he would also cry uncontrollably, though he did not know why he was crying, or, for that matter, why she was.

There were days when she would chatter on and on about nothing in particular, as if a meaningless flood of words had been released inside her head. He would immediately assume the same mood, and prattle to her without rhyme or reason. He sat when she sat, stood when she stood, walked when she did, slept and sat just as she did. There were the days when she would not get out of bed, and he spent his time lying beside her. Some of these days they would make love like animals in rut; on others, they would lie in gloomy silence, without exchanging a word.

But one day a strange thing happened. Unusually, Puranjana rose before his queen, put on golden mail, picked up his bow and quiver, called for his eleventh general, and climbed into his chariot yoked to the five swiftest horses he owned. He had decided to go hunting and he had decided to go without his constant companion, his wife.

Puranjana rode the forest called Pancha Prastha, jungle of the five hills. The lust that held him in its clasp now was the lust for blood. The king seemed possessed, seemed to have turned into a demon, become an Asura for the time.

Savagely, indiscriminately he and his eleventh general hunted. It was a horrific massacre – they killed every animal in that forest. From dawn until dusk, each day that they were in that forest, they slaughtered the abundant game. Corpses everywhere – hare, hog, buffalo, bison, deer, porcupine, goat, leopard and tiger, elephant: blood flowed in rills, and the shocked earth drank it, until she could drink no more. A terrible hush fell on the forest of five hills.

No birds called in the trees anymore; they had all flown the carnage. No beast called in the undergrowth or in the open glades anymore – they all lay still, their bodies shattered with arrows of many feathers. Finally, one evening, suddenly Puranjana felt exhausted. Also, there were no animals left to kill. The king turned home.

Wracked by pangs of hunger and thirst, he returned to his city and the palace. The queen's sakhis drew a hot bath for him; they rubbed soothing oil into his stiff, tense limbs with their soft hands. Slowly, languor stole over him. The women bathed him, and daubed his body with fine perfumes, and draped fragrant garlands around his neck. The king ate a delicious meal, and now, sipping from his silver goblet of wine, he thought of his wife. He remembered that he had gone hunting three days ago without telling her.

He lay languidly in his bed, and asked the women of the harem, 'Where is my queen? Why hasn't she come to me yet?'

There were tears in his eyes; he was so passionately attached to her. The women replied, 'Don't you know, she has entered the chamber of anger, the krodhagraha, and lies crying on the floor.'

He jumped up and ran down the great passages of the palace. He arrived at the door of the darkened chamber, the door to which neither she nor he had ever opened before. Just a single taper burned inside, and dimly he saw where she lay in a heap on the ground, her hair undone and loose, like an ominous shadow around her. He heard her stifled sobs, and her breath hissing like an angry she-serpent's.

He knelt beside her, and gathered her in his arms. He cried, 'Ah, who has wronged you, my love? Just tell me his name, and I will have his head. I cannot bear to see you cry. Tell me who has hurt you.'

He began kissing her tears away, even as he caressed her. She would not relent or say a word until, beside himself with anguish, he prostrated himself at her feet, bathing them in his own tears. Then she murmured, 'Why did you go hunting without telling me?'

He cried, 'Oh, I have hurt you myself! I am so sorry. Forgive me, my love, it will never happen again. It was just a moment's impulse. Come away from this wretched room; come to our apartment. I want you, ah, I want you so badly.'

Now, that he was so abject before her, she wound her slender arms around his neck and kissed him. Then she said, 'Give me a short while, my king, and I will bathe and come to you.'

He returned to their royal apartment, and waited frantically for her. It was more than an hour before she came to him, wearing the sheerest of gowns. Her breasts and her dark womanhood shone clearly through the flimsy garment, and with a moan he drew her to him.

Thus, Puranjana's youth and his manhood leaked swiftly away, in constant indulgence with his queen. He fathered a hundred fine sons on her, and had them married to excellent princesses from the best royal houses. They, in turn, bore him grandchildren on whom he doted, and Puranjana was firmly bound in the ties of blood. Not for a moment did he meditate on the spirit, or on death. Never did he think of what he could do to find moksha. His attachments held him a helpless captive."

Narada paused. Prachinabarhis asked, "And then, Muni? What happened next to Puranjana?"

Slowly the great itinerant resumed his tale, "Well, there was in the nearby hills a gandharva called Chandavega, who always had designs on the city of nine gates, Bhogavati. Chandavega was the lord of a motley army of three hundred and sixty fair-skinned gandharva warriors. These three hundred and sixty each had a wife, some of whom were dark and others fair. With this force of seven hundred and twenty, Chandavega attacked the city of the nine gates, the city of seemingly endless pleasure.

Only the five-headed serpent Prajagara defended Bhogavati. Again and again, with blazing venom and fangs like sharpened pillars, the great naga kept the invaders at bay. For a hundred years, the snake waged a lone battle against the marauding gandharvas. Slowly, he began to tire.

Then there was Kaala Deva's daughter Jara, also called Durbhaga, because she was so unfortunate. One day, as I came down from Devaloka into this world, she saw me. I was young then, and Jara wanted me for her husband. But, O King, I am a Muni and I refused her. She grew so angry that she cursed me to wander forever, homeless.

Jara approached Bhaya, the lord of the Yavanas, who was both fear and death. She cried to him, 'Mighty warrior, be my husband! You never disappoint those who have hope of you. The wise man never refuses a sincere offering. I offer myself to you, great Bhaya. Be kind to me, and make me your wife.'

Bhaya had his own plan for himself – he wanted to bring death to the living, and terror. And this was indeed the secret wish of the Devas. He said to Jara, 'Though I cannot marry you myself, I know the perfect companion for you. My brother Prajvara. Range the earth with him. Take my army with you, and be the twin scourges of all that is mortal!'

His army comprised of the most horrible diseases, and they were all the agents of fate and their fell king Bhaya. Jara and Prajvara, who fetched the final fatal fever to men just before they died, ranged the earth with terror going before them. And one day, inevitably, they arrived at the embattled gates of Bhogavati, where the serpent Prajagara waged his lone battle against Chandavega and his gandharvas. Coming invisibly, like an evil wind, Jara, Prajvara and their army of sickness entered Bhogavati.

The city of a thousand pleasures changed almost overnight into a city of sickness and death. Puranjana saw the plagues around him, and his servants dying horrible deaths, and he was in an agony. He was also helpless to resist the legions of death. The serpent at the gate became powerless to resist the gandharvas, and they, too, stormed the city.

The diseases attacked not just the body but the minds and hearts of the inhabitants of Bhogavati. In weeks, Puranjana saw that his queen no longer loved him, and his own sons and grandchildren turned against him. They were disrespectful and ignored his wishes, even his commands. Puranjana was impotent to resist the fate that overtook him so completely. Pleasure died on his lips, his skin, and a hateful body was all he owned.

Jara ravaged the city of the nine gates as she pleased. Puranjana still indulged himself ceaselessly in his old and habitual lusts. But Death's daughter had turned them all stale and they no longer gave him the least genuine pleasure. To his dismay, he found that he hated everything around him. Why, he hated his once beloved queen, his sons and most of all, he hated himself and what he had become.

Then Prajvara arrived in Bhogavati like a fire of the apocalypse. He burnt the city down. Amidst the flames Puranjana lamented with his wife and children. But there was no escape for him. His palace was surrounded by Bhaya's yavanas and Chandavega's gandharvas. Meanwhile, Prajagara, the five-headed serpent, shook like a snake trapped in the hollow of a tree on fire. He sobbed pitifully but he was impotent to resist the Yavanas and Gandharvas anymore.

Puranjana suffered terribly. He could not imagine how his wife and his children would continue after he himself died. Most of all, he was tormented by the thought of being separated from his wife. 'Ah, they will be like sailors in a ship broken by a storm,' thought he, and lamented still more.

Bhaya arrived in Bhogavati, and entered the king's palace to take Puranjana. The yavanas seized the king, bound him and dragged him like an animal to his fate. The city fell in heaps of ashes. Prajagara joined his master. Strange beasts savaged Puranjana and his serpent, and they cried out in the several agonies that scathed them.

Down sank Puranjana, down into the bottomless pit of hell. For ages he endured the anguishes of naraka, for all his carnal sins. His final thought before he died had been of his lissom wife, and her naked body. After his time in hell, he was reborn on earth – as a princess, the pious Rajasimha of Vidarbha's daughter! She was called Vaidarbhi. When she came of age, her father offered her as a prize to the bravest kshatriya in all the land. The Pandya king Malayadhvaja, conqueror of all his enemies, won her for himself.

Malayadhvaja sired a fine blue-eyed daughter and seven sons on Vaidarbhi. The princes became kings of the Dravida countries that their father conquered. Each of those princes begot a thousand sons, whose progeny will people the earth for a manvantara.

Agastya Muni married the first-born princess of the dark blue eyes. Their son was Dhridachyuta, whose son was the Rishi Idhmavaha. When he grew old, Malayadhvaja divided his kingdom among his sons, and took sannyasa on the Kulachala Mountain, also called the Malaya, after him. Vaidarbhi abandoned her fine royal life, her golden ornaments and her children, to follow her husband into hermitage, as moonlight follows the moon.

Three rivers flow through that land, the Chandravasha, the Tamraparni and the Vatodaka. Every day, the Pandya king bathed in the sacred waters of the three rivers, washing his body and his mind of his sins. He ate only roots, seeds, fruit, flowers, leaves and grass. He exposed himself to extreme heat and cold, hunger and thirst, pain and pleasure, and learnt to regard them all equably. With intense dhyana and by gyana, he quelled his senses, his prana and his mind. He meditated on the nature of his Atman, and its identity with the Brahman.

When he had mastered yoga, for a hundred years of the Devas, the Pandya king sat still as a post. He sat burning with bhakti for the Lord Vishnu, and he was not conscious anymore of his own body. He experienced maya and samsara as a lucid dreamer experiences his dreams. He saw the light of the Soul within his heart, illumining his body, his mind and senses, illumining the universe. He saw his true self as being distinct from and a detached witness to all these phenomena. He ceased to participate in the world of time.

The grace of the Blue God was upon king Malayadhvaja, and he lost all sense of ego and separateness, as the fire of knowledge consumed his ignorance as any fire does its fuel. He was absorbed in the Brahman and he was free.

Meanwhile, his queen Vaidarbhi looked after her husband's corporeal body and its needs, even while he was unconscious of everything. She wore dark clothes and jata on her head, just like him, and she was like a smokeless flame near a perfect, flameless fire. One day, when a hundred years had passed, she touched his body and felt it was cold. Terror swept into her heart, and she began to shake and cry out like a doe that has strayed from the herd and lost its way. She beat her breast and wailed.

'Wake up, my lord! Wake up and speak to me. Oh, the Earth is full of danger. You are her king, and you must protect her. Save your people from thieves and murderers! She is beset from every side.'

She lay at his feet and sobbed. But of course, he did not stir. In a while, she wiped her tears and rose. Like a woman in a dream, she made a pyre of fragrant chandana logs for him. Sobbing again, she managed to lift his macilent body, dry as twigs, onto it. She was about to set a flame to that pyre when suddenly a brahmana materialised at her side, it seemed out of the very air.

He said gently to her, 'Who are you, Lady? Who is the man for whom you are crying so much? Who is he to you?'

He paused and stared intently at her. Then, with just the trace of a smile, he said, 'Don't you recognise me, old friend? Don't you remember me? How we were inseparables, long ago, before this world was made?'

Still, Vaidarbhi did not reply. The brahmana said, 'Do you remember your friend Avijnata? You and I were swans floating on the Manasarovara. For a thousand years, while the pralaya lasted, we were homeless, but together. Then, you wanted to taste the pleasures of the earth, and, leaving me, you flew down into the world, in quest of a perfect city to rule. You saw a city with five gardens, nine gates on guard, three walls, six families of merchants living in it, and five markets. It was built of five elements, and ruled by a woman.'

The brahmana paused, and now faint recognition flickered in Vaidarbhi's eyes. Avijnata continued, 'In the city of nine gates you forgot me. Then death came for you and you were reborn as this princess that you now think you are. But, O my friend, you are neither the king you first became, the kshatriya Puranjana, nor are you the queen Vaidarbhi. You do not belong to this dead king at all; why do mourn him so abjectly?

Ah, how long I have waited for you, and to take you back with me to where you really belong. You and I are truly inseparables. We are not different from each other! You are the jivatma and I, the Paramatma. But we are the same, and I have been calling you back to me ever since you left.'

The queen Vaidarbhi still seemed mystified. Avijnata said, 'You don't understand? My friend, the city called Bhogavati was a human body. Its nine gates were the nine orifices of the body. The five gardens were the sense objects. The great serpent guard was Prana, who alone is the guardian of any body. The three walls were fire, water and food; the five indriyas and the mind were the six merchant families, and the queen Puranjani was intelligence, who enjoyed all these. And with her, you forgot who you really were and fell into a deep swoon of maya.

You are not Vidarbha's daughter; nor are you Puranjani's husband. You and I are hamsas, pure spirits floating on the lake of the Brahman. We are not apart from each other; you and I are mirror images of each other. Wake up, my friend, and remember who you really are.'

Avijnata touched his friend on the arm, and in an immense surge of memory, Vaidarbhi remembered herself again, her original nature. With a joyous laugh, that she was now rid of Chandavega who was time, and Jara who was old age, and Prajvara and Bhaya, who were disease and death, the jivatma was reunited with her soul-mate, the Paramatma. Both were swans again, floating in bliss on the lake of eternity," said Narada to Prachinabarhis, the sacrificer.

The king said to the Sage, "I cannot fathom your story, Muni, though it touches my heart deeply. Explain it to me."

Narada said, "Listen then. This is a tale of the Brahmavidya, the final knowledge. Let us begin with Puranjana. He is the one who creates the city in which he has decided to live – the pura of nine gates, this human body. He is the Atman dwelling in the body. His friend, the Paramatman, is Avijnata, who is always with him, to fetch him back to the true path, the way to moksha.

In the beginning, after the Mahapralaya, only the Brahman existed, the primordial Purusha was by himself. When the universe manifested through the Purusha's own Maya, then Prakriti also was. From Prakriti, the Mahat tattva was born, and became the Aham tattva. From these, the jivatma was born. The jivatma grew restless, and wanted to experience the world of the senses and their objects, the world of samsara, of pleasure and pain. The jivatma entered a body of nine gates – the city called Bhogavati.

The queen of Bhogavati, Puranjani, is the mind; she is buddhi with which the world of pleasures is experienced. Her ten servitors are the ten indriyas, five of the body, karmendriyas, and five of the mind, gyanendriyas. Each has a hundred wives or mistresses, which are their myriad functions. The serpent guardian at the gates of Bhogavati is Prana, life breath. The five heads are the different kinds of vital breath – pana, apana, vyana, udana and samana.

The jivatma enjoys the world of samsara through the nine gates of perception; they lead in and out of the city of Bhogavati. Once he finds buddhi, the jivatma becomes her slave. He mimics her every way; forgetting his true, pristine, illuminous nature, he identifies himself with his mind with which he enjoys the world of the senses and their objects. That is why Puranjana does everything that Puranjani does, whenever she does. The jivatma becomes completely enmeshed in the world of samsara, its enjoyments and torments.

The hundred years for which Puranjana enjoys his city, his wife, his children and his carnal pleasures is the lifespan given to a mortal man. The onslaughts of Chandavega are the constant attacks of time. His three hundred and sixty gandharva warriors and their dark and fair mistresses are the days and the nights of the year. Some nights are mooned, hence the fair mistresses.

Bhaya's daughter Jara is old age and her raiding yavanas are the deadly diseases of the body and the mind. Bhaya is Death and his brother Prajvara is the last fever from which a man dies. Death is Yavaneshwara, the lord of the diseases. Deluded by now about his own true self, the jivatma experiences the sufferings of the body, the terrors of time. He is actually asleep in the coils of maya; but not until he awakens from the long dream or nightmare will he realise that all this is only a dream.

As long as Prakriti holds him in her coils, he commits karma in the three colours – sattvic karma, which is white; rajasic karma, which is red; and tamasic karma, which is black. His karma leads him deeper and deeper into darkness and ignorance. He thinks of himself as being what he is not. He is born and dies, and is reborn, into the different species.

Sattvic karma may take him into one of the higher worlds, full of light, where he enjoys the fruit of his good deeds, until his punya is exhausted. Rajasic karma causes the jivatma to be born in the intermediate worlds, where he strives to improve his lot. And his tamasic karma can fetch him a birth in hell, in the regions of bestial darkness. It is by karma that a soul is born as a man or a beast, a woman, a bird, or a god or demon. So, the soul wanders from one life to another, one birth to the next, always seeking something that he has lost – his own immortal Self.

Of course, the only way back to his Atman and its eternal peace is through our Lord Narayana, the sleeper on infinite waters, the Saviour. Not just by sattvik karma, nor again by yagnas alone can a man liberate himself from the endless cycle of births and deaths. Only God's grace can save him, and God's grace can be had only through bhakti. The umbilicus that binds the jivatma to samsara can only be severed with the sword of devotion.

Bhakti yoga begins with listening to the legends of the Lord. The sacred stories are magical; they fetch the soul back to the paths of worship and of nirvana. Bhakti is to be found only in the cave of your own heart, O Kshatriya, not in your hollow, wasteful sacrifices. When a man is a true bhakta, tales of the Lord flow to him from every side, as rivers do to the sea. Noble men who listen with devotion to the legends of Hari feel no hunger or thirst anymore; they rise swiftly beyond the bonds of pleasure and pain, of sorrow and delusion. For Vishnu himself dwells in the holy legends, and he works a miracle in the spirit of any jivatma who hears them with a devoted mind.

Puranjana was fortunate that he was born as a gifted princess; Vaidarbhi was lucky to marry a king like the Pandya sovereign Malayadhvaja, who was a devout Vishnubhakta. They had a daughter and seven sons. The daughter, with the dark blue eyes, was Asha – she was a pure desire, the desire to hear about the Lord whose skin is the colour of her eyes. The seven sons were Shravana, Kirtana, Smarana, Padasevana, Archana, Vandana and Dasya. These are the seven ways of worshipping the Lord Hari.

First, there is Shravana – listening to the stories of Narayana. Then there is Kirtana – reciting those legends. Smarana is repeating them silently in your mind, remembering them, understanding them. Padasevana is surrendering at the Lord's feet, literally serving his feet. Archana is offering him worship. Vandana is praying to him in many ways, and Dasya is becoming his slave, and only his.

These are the seven ways to break the bonds of karma that hold the jivatma bound in darkness. By these, Puranjana was united with Avijnata and the jivatman was one again with the Paramatman."

Narada paused, then said, "Think of a deer wandering in a sylvan garden. It has found a mate and the garden is full of green grass they can crop together, grass that will last for its lifetime. A fragrant breeze wafts across the garden, and the deer is so happy he thinks that nothing can ever go wrong with his life. But the truth is, in his blind joy, the deer has not seen the wolf that waits in the undergrowth, to feast on his flesh. Nor is he aware of the hunter behind him, with his quiver full of arrows with which to kill the deer.

The pleasures of our lives are as fleeting as the scent of the flowers in the garden. Time, the wolf, is always waiting in the bushes, and Death, the hunter, waits with his thousand arrows, the dread diseases. The wolf growls in the trees and the hunter shoots his arrows one by one; yet, we ignore the warnings and continue as if the body is immortal.

The way of rituals will never lead you anywhere near moksha, Prachinabarhis. Surely, your spirit calls you to seek true freedom that you pursue your yagnas with such fervour. But these karmas of yours will only get you material boons. You should try to have what is beyond them. Great Kshatriya, for one like you the only goal worth striving for is the Lord himself. Follow the seven paths to salvation; seek out the company of holy men and listen to what they have to tell you. Follow what they say and you will arrive at the final surrender – atmasamarpana, the surrender of the soul. He who worships God finds equanimity in the face of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. He inherits the deepest peace. Quickly, he comes to the final goal, the condition that is called Brahmi. In the state of Brahmi the jivatma and the Paramatma merge as one, and then there are no more births or deaths, ever.

Barhisad, give up these vain and foolish sacrifices. Turn to the way of bhakti instead. Worship Narayana in your heart, meditate upon him, and he will surely set you free. The inner path is the one you must tread, O King, not this hollow way of rituals."

Silence ruled Prachinabarhis' sabha. Then, with tears flowing down his face, the king said to the Sage, "Holy Narada, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! You have shown me the true way to be free. From this day, I will not perform any more yagnas, but tread the seven-fold path of bhakti. Bless me, sublime Muni, that I find the Lord's feet that are the refuge of all the living."

Narada laid his hand in blessing on Prachinabarhis' head. Then the Rishi went back to siddhaloka, from where he had come. The king began to worship the Blue God earnestly, and soon, he left his kingdom to his sons and retired to hermitage, in Kapila Vasudeva's asrama. There, he worshipped Krishna with a fierce tapasya, and the Lord gave that ancient king moksha,' Maitreya ended the story of Barhisad who lost his way once, and then returned to the truth.

THE PRACHETASES

VIDURA ASKED, 'WHAT OF PRACHINABARHIS' SONS, THE PRACHETASES? What did they achieve with the Rudra mantra?'

'The Prachetases came to the western sea and submerged themselves under their grandsire's waves. In deep patala, they held their breath and recited the Rudra Gita for ten thousand years. At the end of that time, Vishnu appeared before them, mounted on Garuda and splendid beyond belief.

The Blue God said to the Prachetases, "Sons of Barhisad, I am pleased with your worship. I know your father has commanded you to beget a son to continue his line. You shall have a Prajapati for your son. His fame will cover the earth like the sun's rays do, and he will be remembered though all the ages of the world.

Listen. There was once a great Muni called Kandu who sat in tapasya in the heart of a forest. Indra sent an apsara to disturb the Sage's awesome penance. Her name was Pramlocha, and Kandu fell in love with her. Abandoning his tapasya, he spent many years with her, tasting the sweet fruit of love. A daughter was born to them. One day, Kandu realised that Indra had deceived him. He abandoned his apsara and went away to complete his tapasya in the Himalaya.

Heartbroken, Pramlocha also flew back out of this world and into Devaloka that is her home. Their daughter was still a child, and she lay crying in her father's asrama, abandoned and alone. The trees of the forest adopted that beautiful child; the Moon saw her crying and came down and fed her the amrita welling at his finger, by placing his fingertip in her mouth. That child has grown into a young woman now. She will be your wife, the wife of all ten of you, and she will bear you a son of unequalled splendour.

For a million years of the Devas, you will enjoy your wife and the sovereignty of the earth. No weakness or sickness shall approach you. When a million years have passed, you will remember me again. And to me you shall come."

The Prachetases were overwhelmed and sang his praises. Then they asked him for another boon, "Lord, for as long as we are alive, let us always have the company of your bhaktas. For nothing is more precious in this world."

"So be it," said Narayana, and vanished before their eyes.

The Prachetas brothers rose to the surface of the earth again. They saw it was covered thickly with trees, grown so tall that the sky was not visible anymore. They could see nothing around them, nothing above. In fury, the ten blew fire and wind from their mouths, and burnt the living trees to ashes. The conflagration spread on every side, and Brahma appeared before the Prachetases, and begged them to withdraw their flames.

Some wild trees still remained, and Brahma asked them to give up their daughter Marisha to the sons of Barhisad. In fear, the trees brought out the lovely girl they had sought to hide. All ten Prachetases married her, and she bore them a magnificent son – Brahma's mind-born son Daksha, whom once Siva had punished.

When Daksha was born the sun and the moon seemed eclipsed by his brilliance. He was a master of yagnas, and Brahma made him a Prajapati and the lord of all the other Prajapatis. For a million years, the Prachetases ruled the earth, enjoying every pleasure in swarga, bhumi, and patala. Then they remembered Narayana's promise to them that he would give them moksha one day. The ten left their palaces and kingdoms; they entrusted care of their queen to their son Daksha, and set out to find salvation. They came to the shores of the western sea, where the Muni Jajali had attained nirvana once, and began to meditate upon the Atman.

They sat in yoga, their minds and their breathing perfectly controlled, and Narada came to them one day. They prostrated themselves at the feet of the holy wanderer. When he sat amongst them, they said, "Muni, you range over the earth, dispelling the people's fear even as the sun does darkness. We have grown so attached to our wife and our children, to our kingdom and our pleasures that we have all but forgotten whatever light the Lords Siva and Vishnu kindled in our hearts. O Narada, show us the way again by which we can cross this sea of samsara. Show us the way to freedom."

Narada replied, "Hari is the soul of all the living; he is the only truth. As the waters of the sea rise towards the sun as vapour and then fall again as rain, so too all the universe flows from and returns to Vishnu Narayana. Just as the sun's light is not apart from the sun himself, the universe and everything in it is part of Vishnu.

The gunas appear and fade against the infinite Brahman as darkness, clouds and light do against the limitless sky: themselves changing, never changing the sky. Worship Narayana. He is quickly pleased, and he will set you free."

And Narada told them many legends of the Blue God who lies on his serpent bed upon the infinite sea. Now, these tales were like amrita to the Prachetases whose hearts opened like lotuses at hearing them. When Narada had set them on the Lord's high road, he went away. The Prachetases resumed the tapasya they had interrupted a million years ago, and they found moksha and Vishnu's blue feet – the refuge from which there is no return to sorrow.'

Here Maitreya ended his discourse to Vidura, who laid his head at that Maharishi's feet with tears in his eyes. When Maitreya blessed him fondly, Vidura returned to Hastinapura, to his family, with the image of Vishnu in his heart, and great peace welling there. In time, Vidura would also find the feet of the Blue God, and moksha," said Sri Suka to Yudhishtira's grandson, the king Parikshit of the Kuru vamsa.

Skandha 5

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PRIYAVRATA

SUTA SAYS, 'PARIKSHIT ASKED, "YOU HAVE SAID THAT MANU'S ELDER son Priyavrata became a sannyasi. Yet, I know that he also became a king. How was this, Suka Deva?"

Sri Suka replied, "Svayambhuva Manu had five children. His daughters were Akuti, Devahuti and Prasuti; Priyavrata and Uttanapada were his sons. As you have heard, Devahuti became Rishi Kardama's wife, and Kapila's mother. Akuti married Ruchi Maharishi, and Yagna was her son. Daksha married Prasuti, and their child was Sati.

Uttanapada's son was Vishnu's favourite bhakta, the peerless Dhruva. Priyavrata was his elder brother, but even as a boy he had heard Narada's tales of the Blue God, and lost all desire to rule a kingdom. He relinquished his right as Manu's firstborn son to his brother and went away to Mount Gandhamadana to perform tapasya.

For an age, Uttanapada ruled the earth. After him, his son Dhruva became king. Prachinabarhis and the Prachetases were kings in the same line, and so was Daksha. But there came a time when Daksha took sannyasa in the forest and the land was again without a king. Fear began to spread his tentacles across the sovereignless kingdom. Manu went to the forest in a valley of Mount Gandhamadana to persuade Priyavrata to return and assume the throne. But his son would not hear of it.

Then one day, even as the hermit prince sat talking to Narada who had come to visit him, an unearthly glow filled Priyavrata's cave, and they saw the Lord Brahma himself had appeared there, Manu's father, Priyavrata's grandsire. Priyavrata rose and welcome the glorious Creator. Narada bowed to his father.

Brahma said, 'Priyavrata, my child, the Lord who decides on all our courses, has willed that you must be a king before you find moksha for yourself. It would be foolish to try to flout the Lord's wishes. You have been given a human body to live a normal human life. You have been born as Svayambhuva Manu's eldest son so that one day you would become a king. That time has come. All of us, even I, are like bullocks in the field, with a rope through our noses. We move only as he decides who holds the end of the rope in his hands.

We do not choose where we are born, or anything we do during our lives. We imagine that we exercise free will. Only God decides every moment of ours, and man must live according to his own dharma, or there is no moksha for him. I know that you have set a loftier goal for yourself than earthly kingdom. But there is no danger to the soul if you live in the world, performing your kshatriya dharma, as long as no attachment to the things of the world bind your heart. An unattached man is a jivanmukta. He acquires no vasanas that bind him to further lives; he looks upon pain and pleasure as a dreamer does his dream after he has woken from sleep.

But the man who does not control his senses moves from birth to birth, endlessly, like a man who has lost his way wanders from forest to forest, forgetting where he is, even who he is. Six enemies hunt this man of no restraint – kama, krodha, moha, lobha, mada and matsarya. His ruin is hastened when his own mind and senses answer only his enemies' commands. He is born again and again, and dies again and again.

But the man who has discovered restraint, as you have, Priyavrata, and has realised that he himself is the Paramatman, he is best suited to live in the world of men. He shall be a teacher to his fellows, while remaining unaffected by life's vicissitudes. The indriyas are never conquered until a man has lived in grihastasrama, as a husband and a father, as a man who has faced and overcome his six enemies in open battle. Once they are subdued he can walk fearlessly among other men, for then the Lord is his refuge and his wisdom. God is his protector, and he has nothing to fear.

Such a man enjoys all that the world has to offer, wisely, and never comes to grief.'

Brahma paused, and then said gently, 'Priyavrata, return to the world of men. It is time you accepted your dharma and your destiny, time you ruled the earth as her king. You have already found great peace and light within yourself. Now, share and spread both these, before returning to sannyasa and finding the final release. Do it for me, my child, because I ask you to. I promise you will not regret it.'

Priyavrata folded his hands, and said simply, 'I will do what you ask, my Lord.

Brahma blessed him, with a smile, and vanished from the mountain cave. Manu returned to the cave, and took his eldest son back to the kingdom, and his ancient throne. Having installed his son as king, Svayambhuva Manu returned to hermitage himself.

With Brahma's blessing, Priyavrata was an ideal king. He was calm and detached, and though he lived among other men he was not like them. No bonds held him, and his mind was always absorbed in the thought of the sacred blue feet of Narayana. Brahma blessed him with divine attributes and powers, and he ruled perfectly.

Priyavrata married Viswakarman's daughter Barhishmati, and begot ten sons on her. They were handsome, powerful princes, like him, and his eleventh child was a lovely princess. Priyavrata named them all after the Fire God. He called his sons Agnidhra, Idhmajihva, Yagnabahu, Mahavira, Hiranyaretas, Ghritaprishta, Savana, Medhatithi, Vitihotra and Kavi. His daughter he called Ojasvati. He gave her to Sukra Deva to be his wife, and the peerless Devayani was their daughter.

Kavi, Mahavira and Savana were spiritually inclined from their earliest years. They followed the way of the Paramahamsas, and showed no inclination to rule. They were celibate all their lives, and became sannyasis at an early age, just as their father had.

Priyavrata married a second wife, and she bore him three princes – Uttama, Tamasa and Raivata. In time, each of these ruled over a manvantara.

Priyavrata himself ruled for an arbuda, a hundred million years. He was not only the most devout king but also a fierce and indomitable warrior. His strength and prowess at the longbow were legendary, and no enemy dared oppose him. Indeed, he was so just that none even wanted to.

Priyavrata enjoyed his kingdom well; most of all, he enjoyed his intelligent, beautiful queens. He delighted in their charming conversation, and found deep pleasure and joy in their abundant charms.

Once, Priyavrata noticed that the sun lit up only half the earth, while the other half was plunged in the darkness of night. He decided to follow the sun's dazzling path through the sky. The king had many superhuman powers through his long tapasya and bhakti. Now he summoned a chariot for himself as swift and as bright as the sun's own chariot. He followed the sun's orbit around Mount Meru seven times. Priyavrata's chariot left seven deep and immense chasms upon the earth's surface. These became the seven seas, and the land between them the seven island continents.

The dwipas, the continental islands were called Jambu, Plaksha, Salmali, Kusa, Krauncha, Saka and Pushkara. Each one was twice the size of the previous island, as were the seas surrounding them like great moats. Priyavrata made his seven sons rulers of the seven continents; of course, excepting the three that had become sannyasis.

For an age and more, Priyavrata ruled the earth. Then there came the day when he was suddenly filled with intense revulsion for his life, himself, everything he owned and enjoyed, even his queens and his sons. He said to Narada Muni, who was with him at the time, 'What a fool I have been, plunging myself in this samsara, this mire of the senses. Ah, I have become a monkey for these women to enjoy! But enough now, I must return to the path of truth.'

Vishnu's grace was upon that king; and he left his kingdom to his sons, abandoned his queens like dead bodies, and walked the way of the spirit that Narada had once illumined for him. He returned to the forest and his tapasya that Brahma had interrupted. In time, he found the Lord Narayana's blue feet, and moksha there," said Suka to Parikshit.

AGNIDHRA

VYASA'S ENLIGHTENED SON CONTINUED, "PRIYAVRATA'S ELDEST SON Agnidhra ruled the continent Jambudwipa as wisely as his father had ruled the earth. He kept perfect dharma and watched over his subjects as if they were his own children. But he had no son, and was afraid that he would never attain Pitrloka.

Agnidhra went to Mount Mandara, where apsaras come to play, and sat in an austere penance to Brahma, the Lord of the progenitors of the earth. Brahma sent an apsara called Purvachitti to Agnidhra. She was a dancer in Brahma's own court, and an unworldly beauty. Pretending at first that she did not see the hermit king, she sauntered leisurely through the wild garden next to which he sat in dhyana. Crystalline pools dotted that garden, and the sweet songs of birds filled the bright spring air.

Above those delightful warblings, Agnidhra heard another song – the chiming of Purvachitti's anklets. Slowly, she walked through, beside the water, under the trees covered by golden vines, her hips swaying, as if she was dancing her way towards him. Agnidhra half-opened his eyes and saw her; by now quite close to where he sat in padmasana upon the hide of a deer.

Like a great and exquisite bee, she sniffed the wildflowers that grew in the garden, going from one to the next: her gait seductive; her skin smooth velvet; her body a dream of desire. Her breasts were full, her waist slender as a lotus stem and her hips wide and womanly. Agnidhra felt Kama Deva seize his mind in a soft, wild clasp.

His voice tremulous, he said to her like a fool, 'O Sannyasin, who are you? Are you an amsa of the Brahman, come hunting poor mortals like me in this vana? At whom do you aim your eyebrows like fine arrows? At which poor beast?'

He saw the small swarm of bees that hovered around her for the fragrance of her body, as if she was some wonderful, walking flower. He said, still more witlessly, 'The small dark sishyas of yours chant the Vedas in a drone. It seems to me that they are singing the Sama to you, knowing its deepest meanings. Like Rishis lose themselves in the sweet hymns of the Veda, these little Sages plunge into the flowers that fall from your hair.'

She took a few shy steps towards him, anklets tinkling again. He drew a long breath, 'Ah Brahman! I hear the tittira of your anklets but don't see them for your long garment that has the hue of the kadamba. It wraps itself around your hips like a circle of flames.' His gaze wandered to her breasts, 'And the full, rich horns upon your chest, which you carry with effort since your waist is so slight, hardly able to support their weight. I smell the saffron-coloured paste of the sandalwood with which you have smeared them. Why my asrama floats upon that perfume now.'

He paused, his eyes on fire to look at her. Then he said, 'Which swarga do you come from? Are there more like you? Take me to them, for you have uncalmed my stillness!'

He watched her chewing the betel leaf in her mouth. Helpless by now to stop himself, he said, 'What are you chewing, that your breath blows like an oblation offered to a sacred agni? You wear two golden crocodiles in your ears! Surely, you are an amsa of the Blue God.'

He laughed in some rapture, 'Your face is like a clear lake, and your lips agitated fishes swimming in its crystal water. Your teeth are like rows of swans, and your curls like hives of bees.'

He gasped, as a breath of wind lifted her lower garment, showing a flash of her legs and fair thighs. 'Vayu Deva is aroused by you! Look how he tries to strip your clothes away. Oh, you have ruined my dhyana. Tell me about the tapasya that blessed you with such beauty. Come, friend Sannyasin, come and meditate with me. Looking at you, I feel the Lord

Brahma is pleased with me and has sent you to me. Yes, I am certain of it! And for Brahma having sent you, and for your beauty, I will not let you away from me.

My eyes fix themselves upon you, and they will not look away. My mind follows my eyes, and is also yours to command. O friend Sannyasin, with the delectable horns upon your chest, keep me with you and ask any service of me that you care to.'

He spoke plainly, he spoke so charmingly, and she was taken up with him. She saw how handsome he was, intelligent, noble, radiant and certainly liberal, the way he accosted her. Happily, she went with the lord of Jambudwipa, Priyavrata's eldest son, to his palace, and he sired nine sons on her, who were called Nabhi, Kimpurusha, Harivarsha, Ilavrata, Ramyaka, Hiranmaya, Kuru, Bhadrasva and Ketumala.

She bore these nine children in nine years, and then abruptly, leaving them, she abandoned her husband, his place and kingdom, and went back to Brahmaloka, to the sabha of the Creator, where she was an immortal dancer. Agnidhra's sons were blessed with superhuman stature, strength and intelligence from both their parents, particularly their unearthly mother. When the time came, they ruled Jambudwipa, which their father divided into nine equal portions and bequeathed to them. The land of Bharatavarsha was the kingdom that Nabhi, the eldest, ruled; it was then called Ajanabha.

But Purvachitti left Agnidhra desolated when she left the earth. Night and day, he thought of nothing except her, and with an intense tapasya, he also attained the same loka as that apsara in the realm of the manes, and was united with her again.

When Agnidhra died, his nine sons married Meru's nine daughters – Merudevi, Pratirupa, Ugradamshtri, Lata, Ramya, Syama, Nari, Bhadra and Devaviti," says the profound Suka to the king cursed to die in a week.

NABHI AND THE BIRTH OF RISHABHA

“NABHI AND HIS WIFE MERUDEVI HAD NO CHILDREN, AND WORSHIPPED the Lord Narayana as the Yagnapurusha. Moved by their devotion, Vishnu appeared, four-armed and refulgent, before the king, his queen and their priests. He wore fulvid silk and the Srivatsa whorl adorned his lofty chest beside the kaustubha, ruby crimson as a red star. He had the Panchanjanya, the Sudarshana, the Saringa and the Kaumodaki in four perfect hands. He wore a vanamala of unfading flowers that grow only in the gardens of Vaikuntha.

The brahmanas at Nabhi's yagna worshipped Vishnu in ecstasy, hardly believing their fortune. They offered him padya and arghya, and said, ‘Lord of Gods, who are beyond Prakriti and Purusha, we have no words with which to begin to praise you! We cannot believe our fortune that you have appeared before us today.’

Unable to continue for the bliss that his presence swept over them, tears streaming down their faces, those priests silently, fervently, now offered him some holy water, some pure white shoots, some tender tulasi leaves, and some fresh sprouts of durva grass.

Their voices unsteady, they continued, though he was yet to speak a word. ‘Lord, grant us that our hearts and lips always well with your sacred names that have the power to burn all sins to ashes. May we remember you in our direst need, whenever we fall in the darkness of time; may we remember you when we are ill or hungry: may we remember you as we die!’

After another pause, because their mouths were dry and their bodies trembled, the brahmanas said, 'Our king Nabhi has worshipped you for a specific reason. He wants to have a son, and, O Lord, he wants to have a son who is exactly like you. Forgive us, that you, O Master of all the galaxies, have been invoked at this sacrifice for such an insignificant purpose.'

He was awesome, as well, and they feared his wrath since he had not yet spoken a word. 'We are steeped in samsara, plunged in avidya that we dared worship you for such a mundane and trivial boon. We beg you, forgive us if we have presumed too much!'

But Vishnu smiled, and said kindly, 'Brahmanas, the boon you have asked for is not trivial or mundane. You have asked for the king Nabhi to have a son exactly like me in every way. But, Rishis, I fear there is no one exactly like me in every way except myself. Yet, you have asked, and I must grant you whatever boon you want. There is just one solution to our problem, Holy Ones – I will be born myself as Nabhi's son.'

And he vanished like a treasure won in a dream.

Vishnu incarnated himself as Merudevi's son. He was a white, pure child, and completely sattvik. He had all the Lord's other distinguishing marks upon his body – the signs of the thunderbolt and the goad on the soles of his feet. He was perfectly calm, restrained, detached, and he had uncanny spiritual powers from his very birth. He was abundantly strong, vigorous, valiant and splendid, and the poets in his father's kingdom sang his praises.

Nabhi named his son Rishabha, the excellent one. In Devaloka, Indra was envious of Rishabha and did not send down rain on the continent of Ajanabha. Nabhi was delighted with his son. He set him on his knee and caressed him incessantly; he would hardly let the child, who was the Blue God incarnate, out of his sight.

When the prince had grown up, Nabhi crowned him king and he and Merudevi retired to hermitage in Badarikasrama, where they worshipped Vishnu as Nara Narayana. He became a jivanmukta, while he was still alive. In their songs about Nabhi, the Rishis ask which other man was so pure in his dharma that God himself was born as his son. Also, they sing that he was so devoted to the brahmanas of the earth that they caused the Yagnapurusha to appear at Nabhi's sacrifice.

When he was king, Rishabha saw his country as his karma kshetra, as vital as his own body, in which he would sow the seeds of moksha. He entered gurukula, and was the most humble, obedient sishya to his brahmana gurus. However, he was so brilliant that they, his masters, often felt they were hearing the true scriptures for the first time from their young disciple's lips. When he completed his tutelage, he sought his preceptors' permission to become a grihasta, to marry and raise children.

He humbly sought Indra's permission to marry, to placate the jealous Deva, and Indra himself gave the princess Jayanti to Rishabha, to be his wife. The rains returned to Ajanabha. Jayanti bore Rishabha ten sons.

The first was the awesome Rajarishi Bharata, after whom the land of Bharatvarsha was named. The other nine were Kusavarta, Ilavarta, Brahmavarta, Malaya, Ketu, Bhadrasena, Indrasprisha, Vidarbha and Kikata.

Rishabha had another ninety sons, all deeply spiritual and righteous princes, among them Kavi, Hari, Antariksha, Prabuddha, Pippalayana, Avis, Hotra, Drumila, Camasa and Karabhajana: all these were paragons of dhyana, who illumined the way to liberation for the Lord's bhaktas. Jayanti's other eighty-one sons converted themselves into brahmanas – that is, they meditated upon the Brahman.

Rishabha himself was immaculate in his vairagya, his detachment. He was immersed in the joy that welled in his own spirit, the eternal joy that sustained him. By his very nature, because of who he was, he was free of evil.

He was the Lord himself, but he lived like an ordinary mortal. His conduct was exemplary; he taught, by his life, the sanatana dharma. As a king, he was impartial, friendly and compassionate. In grihastasrama, he left an indelible memory for other men to emulate – of truth, wealth, fame, family, joy and later, liberation.

As the king behaves so do the people. And during Rishabha's reign dharma spread in the hearts of men like a pristine fire. No man cast his eyes on the possessions of his fellow men; no man expected anything from another. Deep contentment was upon the kingdom, and worship of the Lord was ubiquitous.

Once, Rishabha journeyed through his vast kingdom and arrived in the part of it called Brahmavarta. He came to a great congregation of the wisest brahmanas in all the land. His sons were with him, and in that august conclave, and before the people as well, he said to the princes, 'In this mortal world, devotion to pleasures is for animals. Pleasure in excess leads swiftly and certainly to misery, for when men devote themselves to lives of pleasure they are like dogs feeding on excrement.

This human life is meant for nobler pursuits; it is meant for us to realise God. Bhakti purifies the human mind, and leads it to light, while the hunt for pleasure binds it in darkness. A pure mind leads a man to the infinite Brahman, in whom he finds his true emancipation and his eternal bliss.

Wise men say that he who serves the great finds the gateway to moksha. While he who associates with women and those that are the slaves of women, finds the gateway to samsara, to sorrow and to hell. When the mind is serene and controlled, the man is above anger; he is friendly and just. He is the mahatma, the great man. His only goal in life is to serve God, and to find sanctuary at His lotus feet. The true man is beyond every other ambition, beyond every other desire. He requires no material possessions other than the most elementary ones, the barest necessities.

He has no attachment towards his home or his family, or even his life. But when a man lives to gratify his senses, he loses his discretion, and falls into sin. It is these sins of past lives that have caused the jivatma to be born in a body in this life. And the body becomes a burden for the soul. The Atman remains hidden in the darkness of maya, as long as one does not actively seek its true nature.

As long as the body indulges in karma, the mind remains attached to karma. A mind thus disposed binds the soul into more and more bodily incarnations. The thread of karma lengthens; its knots grow in number and become more inextricable. Karma begets more karma, and the darkness the soul is plunged in becomes deeper.

Until such a soul finds the grace of Narayana, there is no moksha for him. When a jiva grows careless of his own best interests, and begins to confuse the real and the unreal, he travels farther and farther away from his true nature. The home becomes his prison and sexual indulgence his only, hollow, joy. The Sages have always said that marriage is a knot that mutually binds a man and a woman into delusion and sorrow. Already each one has bound himself and herself with the knot of ignorance in his and her mind. The knot of marriage is a second bond of ignorance.

Only when this knot is loosened can a man, or a woman, begin to find true freedom. For then the jiva shrugs off its ahamkara, and walks the road towards the light of nirvana.

Through bhakti to the Atman, the Self, through service to that Guru; by being free of desire for the enjoyments the earth has to offer; by being indifferent to the opposites of pain and pleasure, as they arise; by knowing beyond doubt that the existence of the jiva is subject to misery everywhere, even in the next world; with tapasya and abstinence from all karma that is tainted with kama, and with an inquiring spirit – a man can hope to return to the pristine condition, to the truth.

Act, but for the sake of the Lord; listen to and narrate his legends as often as you can; associate with holy men, the enlightened ones; praise God; harbour no enmity for any of the living; be restrained and even-tempered; always seek to detach yourself from a sense of identity with the world and its complex, cunning trammels.

My sons, I say this to you because I love you dearly. Study the scriptures that deal with the Atman and the Brahman; live in seclusion; control your breathing, your senses and your mind; observe strict celibacy; believe absolutely in the truth and the teachings of the saints, and in the revelations of God; live your lives by that belief; always be vigilant, because sin is never far, and weakness; perform your dharma unwaveringly; observe mowna as much as you can.

Let your hearts be clear, and aware that the Lord is present everywhere. Be brave and committed to your quest, and you will rid yourself of the knot of ahamkara, and even the linga sarira. Those are the knots that bind with the karma of all your past lives, that bind with darkest delusion.'

Rishabha paused, then continued in his kindly, sonorous voice, 'A king, a master or a father who thinks of salvation as the highest and only end of life, who wants to achieve moksha, must instruct his wards in the way of truth. But if they do not listen to him at first, or if they err in their ways, he must be patient with them. He must remember that they are held fast by ancient knots of karma, that they are deluded. He must remember that he himself is only a pilgrim on the path to freedom.

Those bound in samsara have no notion of what is good for them. They pursue pleasure endlessly, and enter into dire enmities with one another for the sake of a mere shred of pleasure, never thinking what long misery such enmities result in for themselves and their enemies. The good king, master, parent will lead his wards away from such attachment and conflict. He who cannot lead his son, his subject or his pupil out of darkness and into light should renounce his throne, his parenthood and his claim to being a Guru.

The sishya who finds his Guru incompetent to lead him to moksha should leave his master. The man or woman who cannot show their child the way to salvation should not beget children. There is no sin in disowning a parent who cannot show a son or daughter the way to liberation; just as Prahlada did not sin when he refused to follow the dark path down which Hiranyakashyapu wanted to lead him. Why, a bhakta may leave off worshipping a God who does not illumine his path to nirvana.'

Rishabha paused, then continued slowly, 'My sons, this body of mine is inscrutable, because I am not an ordinary mortal. I am pure sattva and eternal dharma abides in me. For that I am called Rishabha. All of you are born from my heart, and I say to you now – serve your brother Bharata! If you serve him, you will serve me, and you will serve dharma as well.

My sons, look upon all creation and all the created as your own selves. Look upon all of them as my abode. Never feel envy towards your brother, and I will know that you have truly worshipped me. Dedicate your bodies and lives to me; your minds, your speech, your thoughts, your every deed. Worship me, and you shall find moksha for yourselves.'

Rishabha spoke thus to his sons, though they were already masters of devotion and restraint. But he, their father, embodied the path of the

Paramahamsas, and his teaching to them was meant for the rest of the world, also. For who could deny the veracity of what a king taught his own sons in a public gathering?

Having delivered this message to his sons, Rishabha crowned Bharata king. Then, he left his palace, his queen, his sons, and all his possessions. He discarded even his clothes, and went forth, wind-clad, digambara, into the wilderness. His hair wild and matted, the divine fire Ahavaniya enshrined in him, looking like a mad man, Rishabha left Brahmavarta forever. Alone, and his mind serene, he wandered across the wide earth as an Avadhuta who has renounced the world and lost all sense of his body.

He took a vow of mowna and never spoke even when men addressed him. He behaved like an idiot, a ghost, a deaf-mute, a blind man. The people of the world thought him mad wherever he went. In cities and towns, villages, wild groves and gardens, upon mountains and in the hearts of forests, in military camps, cow-pens where he sometimes slept, even in the asramas of Rishis, he was mocked and ill-treated by the lowest of the low.

Men abused him, threatened him, beat him, kicked him, spat on him, urinated over him, threw the worst filth on him, stoned him. But as an elephant does the flies buzzing around him, Rishabha ignored all these; he scarcely noticed them. He was beautiful to look at, unearthly, and that disturbed the men of the places he wandered through.

The women were often wildly drawn to him, desiring him helplessly. He was tall, his skin fine and delicate, as were his hands and feet. His limbs were long and graceful, and his body exquisitely proportioned. His face shrouded in jata was ineffably handsome, and his smile was enchanting. His eyes were reddish and large, like the petals of a full-blown lotus. His naked form was covered with a wayfarer's dust and dirt. He was unwashed, but the women of the towns he meandered into were all powerfully smitten. To those whose minds were bound by convention and commonness, he seemed like one possessed by a devil.

He never resisted the abuse the world heaped on him. But he would behave differently as different divine moods and madnesses took him. One day, he decided to live like an ajagara, just to see how the creature felt. He crawled on the ground like a python; ate, drank, digested, urinated and excreted like one, until his body was covered in smears of his own faeces. But that excrement smelt as sweet as jasmine flowers, and perfumed the air for ten yojanas around him, so the people came in wonder to discover the source of the fragrance of heaven and fled in horror when they discovered Rishabha who hissed at them like a great snake, and then laughed insanely, never speaking a coherent human word.

Then, he became a bull, a deer and a crow, living exactly as those beasts and birds do. The Lord Rishabha was free; nothing bound him. He could enter into any creature he chose to, and share in its existence. And he lived in bliss, the bliss of Narayana. Many siddhis came to him, unsought. He could fly through the air, quick as light or time; he could make himself invisible and go anywhere he pleased. But he did not much care for these magical powers."

Parikshit wanted to know, "When the siddhis come unsought to a yogi, they do him no harm. Why did Rishabha look askance upon them?"

Suka said, "The wisest men do not trust themselves, their own minds. The best hunter is wary of the beast that has fallen into his snare. The greatest Munis have said that one should never form friendship with the fickle mind. Why, even the Lord Siva lost an age of punya when his mind deceived him, and he was smitten by Mohini. Some even say the mind is like the faithless wife, who would let her lover into her home at dead of night to-have her husband murdered. A man who trusts his mind is always a potential prey to lust, to anger and delusion.

None of the wise regards his mind as either obedient or trustworthy. The mind is the very root of anger, lust, pride, sorrow, delusion and fear. The mind binds a man with karma.

Rishabha was the Lord of the Devas, incarnate. But he lived like an Avadhuta, behaved like a madman. He knew the Paramatman as part of himself; he was free from ahamkara and even the linga sarira. Rishabha's body was like no other and he ranged the world by some vestigial ego caused by an unconscious effect of his yogic powers. Fate led him through Konkana, Venkatadiri, Kutaka and south Karnataka. He roamed the forest around Mount Kutaka with a stone clasped between his teeth, his hair wild, yes, completely like a madman. Suddenly, a fire rose up in that forest, burning it down in ashes, and the Lord Rishabha's body along with it."

Suka paused and was thoughtful. He said, "In the dim heart of the kali yuga there will be a foolish king called Arhat, who, hearing about the Lord Rishabha's life, will attempt to imitate its external aspects, while being anything but an Avatara. By then, the people themselves will have grown so crass with the sins accumulated across many births and deaths that Arhat's heretical teachings will gain sway over their minds and the earth. Stupefied by the godless ways of heresy, the Holy Land itself will fall into the deepest pit of adharma. Evil and sin will pass for truth and goodness in that time and men will mock the Vedas and even the great Gods.

Rishabha Deva was born to teach men steeped in the violent rajoguna the way to the truth. The Sages say that of all the continents the varsha called Bharata is the most sacred, for here men sing the praises of the Blue God Murari. How fortunate the race of Priyavrata is, how glorious it is! Which other yogi can ever emulate the life of the matchless Rishabha, saint among saints? The sannyasis of the earth spend their lives trying to acquire the siddhis he relinquished without a thought, even though he obtained them with no effort on his part.

O Parikshit, the legend of Rishabha is immortal and mystical. He who listens to it with devotion is purified of his sins; Munis know that great auspiciousness and high bliss dwell in this tale. Those who hear it repeatedly find the truest Vishnubhakti in their hearts. And bhakti, O Kshatriya, is where men find solace from the torments of samsara. True bhaktas of the Blue God show no desire even for the final Purushartha, moksha, but are content to be devotees forever. He who has bhakti has already attained all the Purusharthas.

I bow my head to the Lord Rishabha, who is above every desire, who is absorbed in his own Self, and who, out of compassion, exemplified the fearless nature of the Atman to men, who, being asleep in the embrace of maya, are embalmed, as it were, in the body, its cares and desires."

BHARATA, THE GREAT

PARIKSHIT NOW ASKED, "TELL ME ABOUT RISHABHA'S SON BHARATA, MY lord. Our Holy Land is named after him, I know."

Suka began the life of that ancient monarch, "Bharata was an incomparable bhakta of the Lord Narayana, and he married Viswarupa's daughter Panchajani.

Even as Ahamkara creates the tanmatras, he fathered five wonderful princes on his wife. They were like him in every way, and he named them Sumati, Rashtrabhrita, Sudarshana, Avarana and Dhumraketu. It was indeed after Bharata that our sacred land of Ajanabha was named Bharatavarsha, Bharata's continent.

Bharata ruled with deep dharma and loved his subjects like his own children. He observed the rituals proper to a great king, and dedicated them, his rule and his very life to Narayana. Day by day, Bharata purified himself and grew in stature. Brahman manifested himself as Vasudeva in Bharata's heart, and grace was upon him and everything he did. Bharata ruled for a million years, then divided his kingdom equally among his five sons and took sannyasa in the forest.

He went away to the asrama to the awesome Rishi Pulaha, which is such a holy place that even today Lord Hari manifests himself for his bhaktas in whatever form they want to see him. The river Gandaki flowing beside that asrama is full of precious saligramas, which are the body of the Lord. Bharata began living in a tapovana near Pulahasrama, and he worshipped the Blue God with flowers, tender leaves, especially of the tulasi, fruit, naivedya and water from the river that is also called the Chakranadi for the whorled pebbles that are the saligramas.

Bharata withdrew his mind from every attachment, and became completely tranquil. Divine bliss filled his heart. In time, he sat unmoving, absorbed in the Brahman. The hair all over his body stood on end for ecstasy, and often, his eyes streamed tears of intense bhakti. Bharata even forgot that he sat in tapasya; he was lost to everything except the tide of devotion in his heart. He sat on a deerskin, wearing the hide of another deer as his garment. His hair hung down to his waist in thick jata. He only stirred to bathe during the three sandhyas, at dawn, noon and dusk, in the river of saligramas.

Bharata's body was radiant, as he sat hymning the Supreme Purusha in the sun with songs from the Rig Veda, and with the holiest mantra of all, the primordial Gayatri: *AUM Bhuur Bhuvah Svah; Tat Savitur Varenyam; Bhargo Devasya Dhimahi; Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodayat.*

'The light of Surya Deva transcends Prakriti. You dwell in that light; You who created the universe, who know all things, who are the Lord of jivas and protect them. We seek refuge in you.'

One morning, Bharata had bathed and worshipped the rising sun. He sat on the banks of the Gandaki repeating the holy syllable **AUM** for three muhurtas. A young female deer, heavy with child, came to the river, quite close to where Bharata sat. She bent her slim face and drank thirstily. Suddenly, a deafening roar rang out from the trees, the roar of a hunting lion. Her eyes wild, the deer leapt into the shallow water and splashed across it, making for the other bank. Another roar shook the sylvan place, and in sheer fright the black deer gave birth in the very water, expelling her calf abruptly.

She gained the far bank, staggered to a cave and fell dead at its mouth. The little calf lay helpless in the water, and the river began carry it away. Bharata had watched all this as in a dream, opening his eyes at the lion's roar. Now he sprang up, ran into the water and gathered the little fawn in his arms. There was no sign of the herd to which its mother had belonged. Bharata had seen the female deer collapse and die. He knew the calf would also die unless he cared for it. He took the young one back to his asrama, and began to raise it as if it was his own child.

As the fawn grew, Bharata became passionately attached to it. He would feed it, talk to it, play with it. He became so engrossed in caring for the young deer that he began to neglect his tapasya. Whenever he sat to meditate, the little deer would come and want to play with him. Immediately he would abandon his dhyana. He told himself, 'He has no one except me. I am his only family, his mother and father, his all. He depends on me completely, and I will never forsake him.'

He took the young deer with him wherever he went – to the river to bathe, or the forest to gather kusa grass, twigs and branches, leaves, fruit and water for his worship. He was always anxious for its safety in a jungle full of predators. As the deer grew, it sometimes wandered off on its own. And then Bharata would become sick with fear, convinced that wolves or wild dogs or a tiger had eaten it. He would comb the forest, calling out to the deer; and when he found it, he would embrace it like a child, shed tears and bring it back to the asrama in his arms.

Whenever he did manage an hour of worship, he would invariably begin his ritual with a prayer for the deer's safety, 'May you be safe from every side, my little one. May all the Gods protect you.'

At times, the deer would stay away for a day and a night, and Bharata would be beside himself. 'Ah, the child's mother gave birth near me, knowing she was going to die. I have betrayed her trust. My little one, I will never see you again because I did not protect you as I should have. Surely a wolf or a tiger has eaten you!'

And he would sob bitterly. Gone was Bharata's serenity, gone his peace of mind. He would cry, thinking of how the deer would come and disturb his meditation, by prodding him with its horns, soft as water drops. He gazed forlornly at hoof marks the little black antelope had left, and tears flowed down his face. He looked up at the moon risen into the clear sky, and imagined a mark shaped like a deer on Soma Deva's face. He thought of heaven as a place full of little deer.

Then, the deer returned and Bharata welcomed him like a prodigal son. So it went, and Bharata grew more and more entangled in his attachment for the deer. Death came for Bharata, and with the young black buck watching him mournfully, he passed on, gazing raptly into the face of his deer, which was like a mourning son.

Bharata was so attached to his deer, his final moment so full of the creature, that he was reborn as a deer himself! When he was just a fawn, he realised what had happened to him and was in torment.

'Alas! I had rid myself of every attachment, my kingdom, my wife, my sons. The Lord Narayana was all I thought of and I came to the most sacred asrama on earth. Ah, I was within a whisker of finding moskha. But then, a young deer came into my life and I forgot everything else. I even forgot my Vishnu. So powerful is attachment! I have been a fool, and now I must pay for my foolishness with this life of an animal.'

He shed some tears, and then decided he would strive hard, even as an animal, to fill his heart again with bhakti. Bharata, the deer, left his mother's side as soon as he was a little grown, and made his way alone back to the asrama of Pulaha and Pulastya at Saligrama, on the banks of the Gandaki. He lived there, as a pet of the Rishis, entirely tame. And the Sages marvelled at how the black deer always came near them whenever they were recounting any of the Lord's legends, and how he seemed to listen with such absorption to their Purana. Thus Bharata the deer spent his days, subsisting on dry grass and leaves, and doing penance for the sin of attachment that had bound him into this animal's life. At last, his paapa exhausted, he found release. Lying in the waters of the holy Gandaki, he left his deer's body," said Sri Suka to Parikshit.

JADA BHARATA

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "WHAT BECAME OF BHARATA'S SPIRIT AFTER HIS LIFE as a deer was over?"

"During his life as a king, as the son of Rishabha, Bharata had been initiated into the Atma vidya. He had followed the path to liberation assiduously, until his strange attachment to the young deer robbed him of nirvana. He had paid for that lapse with his life as a deer. But he did not find moksha as soon as his deer's life ended. He had one more life to live before he found final liberation, the condition known as Brahmi.

It is well known that when a yogi is to be born again into the world he is frequently born as the son of a good brahmana. In the clan of Angiras himself, there was such a brahmana, a restrained man and calm. He was known for his austerity, his deep knowledge of the Veda, his liberality and generosity, his modesty and forbearance, his devout nature – so that men said that here surely was a true brahmana, not just by birth but by the way he lived his life.

This brahmana had two wives. He sired nine sons on his first wife, and a pair of twins on his second, a boy and a girl. The Rishis say that the boy was Rishabha's son Bharata.

From his earliest childhood, the boy feared filial attachment like a demon. He went out of his way to cultivate aloofness from his family. His father was a conventional brahmana, who was a Vedic scholar. He had raised all his sons to be like himself, and for his youngest son, too, he performed all the samskaras right up to the samavartana as prescribed in the Shastras. Having performed his youngest son's upnayanam, the father began to teach him everything a young brahmana must learn – achamana, sandhya, and other rituals.

But the boy was a terrible student. It seemed he was a dullard and could learn nothing. The simplest mantras and rituals were quite beyond him. The father, in his deep love for his son, persisted: to little avail. In Sravana, he began to teach his son the Veda. But though he taught him through the spring months of Chaitra and Visaka and also the summer months of Jyeshta and Ashada, the boy could not recite even the Gayatri mantra. It seemed his tongue slipped awkwardly over the sacred words, or twisted them around so they meant nothing.

The boy's father did not relent or give up. With monumental patience, he continued to teach Bharata what an upakurvana brahmachari should know. But the boy was determined to foil his father's attempts to educate him. He continued to stubbornly mispronounce the Holy Scriptures, and to behave in the most atrocious fashion so that people thought he was a deaf-mute, and later, an imbecile. But the boy remembered his previous lives and was above being worried about what people thought of him. Finally, very likely in despair, the old brahmana died.

Bharata's mother, the brahmana's younger wife, entrusted the care of her children to his older wife, and committed sati on his funeral pyre. With their father gone, Bharata's half-brothers and their mother began to treat him like a servant in their house. They never suspected who he was, and the awesome powers he had, for he continued to behave like a halfwit. They abandoned their father's fond hopes for him, and set him to do menial work for them, in the house and in the field. They gave him the hardest, most demeaning work, at times for inhuman wages; at others, they did not pay him at all.

He never complained, but seemed perfectly content with the life they thrust on him. He stopped speaking entirely and ate anything they gave him as if it was amrita – broken leftover rice, oil cake, the husk of grain, worm-ridden grain called kulmasa, the burnt rice at the bottom of the vessel that no one else would eat. In return, they made him work long hard hours.

But day by day he grew in spirit, for bhakti for the Blue God was always in his heart, and he hardly identified himself with his body anymore. The bliss of the Atman filled him, and he was beyond pleasure and pain, beyond being touched by heat and cold, honour and dishonour, or any of the pairs of opposites.

Nobody could dream how great he was, he kept his greatness so well disguised. With the work he did he became strong and muscular. He went bare-bodied like a bull in winter and summer, and during the rains. He never anointed himself with oil, as every other brahmana did, nor bathed. Under the dust and dirt that covered him, who could see the radiance of his body? He was like the most precious jewel, obscured by a coating of clay. His hair hung long, unwashed and unkempt. He wore a filthy, ragged cloth around his waist, and men of the lowest castes laughed at him, calling him a brahmana just in name, and more often, a madman.

He began to work for anyone who cared to employ him, from day to day, and there was no work that was too mean for him. He would do anything asked of him, but he never spoke a word. One night, he was out in the cold winter, watching over a field to keep out deer, wild pig and other animals.

Nearby, the chieftain of a band of Panis, bandits, had undertaken a sacrifice to the Goddess Bhadrakali. The man had no children, and he was offering the Goddess a human life. Unfortunately for the dacoit, his sacrificial offering escaped in the night. His men hunted everywhere in the dense night, but could not find the intended victim, who showed a clean pair of heels, putting a healthy distance between the brigands and himself.

Ranging the darkness, the Vrishala robbers saw Bharata, locked in Virasana, guarding the field. They saw he was well built, and his body unblemished by any defect or even a scar, though he was filthy. He had not even covered himself against the biting midnight cold. Here was the perfect replacement for the yagnapasu who had escaped; why, this one would make a much better sacrifice. Their chieftain would be pleased. Making up their minds, the bandits jumped on him out of the night, bound him with a rope, and hauled him off to the Kali temple, where their master waited impatiently. They were a little surprised that such a powerfully built fellow was as unresisting as this one.

With their own tantric ritual, the Panis bathed Bharata, who remained silent and unprotesting as if all this was hardly happening to him. They clothed him in a new, unwashed length of cloth of the proper colour for their sacrifice. They adorned him with ornaments, coloured his face and body with dark pigments, draped wildflower garlands around his neck, and marked his forehead with a tall sandalwood paste tilaka.

They gave him a meal like he had never eaten, a mountain of food, which he finished without saying a word, and still supremely indifferent. The robbers said among themselves that he was an idiot, the perfect yagnapasu. When he had finished his meal, they led him into the Goddess' temple. They brought incense and butter lamps, wreaths of flowers, fried rice grains, green shoots and offerings of fruit. They made Bharata sit before the great black stone idol of the Goddess Chandika. Her crimson tongue hung out of her lips, her hair was wild and loose, she was fanged and lovely.

The Pani chieftain, a great coarse figure of a man, came up behind Bharata who was still to make the slightest protest or, for that matter, give the faintest indication that he was aware of what was happening. The robber king meant to offer Bharata's blood as wine for the fierce Devi to drink and his flesh as meat for her to eat. The Pani held a great curved sword in his hands, which had been charmed with a specific mantra for the Goddess. Loud rhythmical drumming and song filled the temple. The bandits danced for the Goddess.

But the Goddess Bhadrakali saw clearly out of her stone eyes. She saw a brahmana who shone brilliantly about to be sacrificed to her. She saw through Bharata's carefully cultivated image of being an imbecile. She saw him for what he truly was – a mahatman, a great bhakta on the verge of moksha. She was scorched by his brahmic lustre, and she was outraged that the brigands were about to sacrifice such a one.

The Goddess burst forth from her stone. She came in wrath and she was dreadful. Her crimson eyes rolled in fury: her arched eyebrows were flung high; her fangs were bared as if she meant to devour the very earth for the crime that was about to be committed in her temple. In a flash, she seized his sword from the bandit chieftain, and with one inscrutable stroke, she beheaded him and all his men.

A host of ferocious servitors came behind her, and as Bharata still sat quietly, as if nothing extraordinary was happening around him, Bhadrakali and her attendants drank the blood spouting from the dead brigands' throats. They anointed themselves with the gore, as they danced in macabre celebration, throwing the Panis' heads to and fro between them in a game of catch.

Bharata sat serenely through all this, then he rose quietly and walked out into the night and back to the field he had been guarding, without ever having uttered a word," Suka said. He added, "The Lord always protects his bhaktas, wherever they are. Those that try and harm them themselves perish."

THE PALANQUIN BEARER

SUKA PAUSED, AND PARIKSHIT SAID, "ARE THERE NO MORE LEGENDS OF Risabha's great son, my lord?"

Vyasa's enlightened son resumed, "Once, Rahugana, the king of the Sindhu and Sauvira, was on his way to meet Kapila Vasudeva, to seek wisdom from him.

The king travelled in a palanquin, and the captain of the bearers was on the lookout for one more man to share the burden, so they could move more quickly. His gaze lighted on Bharata who stood beside the road they were going along. He saw the young man was strongly built, and he looked perfect for the job. The young man looked slightly bemused and foolish, too, and the captain of the palanquin-bearers thought that he could be made to work as well as a bull or a donkey. The king's soldiers accosted Bharata and forced him to join the palanquin-bearers. There was no question of even paying the strapping young man anything.

As usual, Bharata made no murmur of protest; it never occurred to him to protest. It was forbidden for a kshatriya to make a brahmana his palanquin-bearer, but because of Bharata's unkempt unwashed appearance, Rahugana's men never suspected that he was a brahmana. Bharata docilely picked up one end of the palanquin. But, while the other bearers walked in step with one another, the new man hesitated for every pace he took. He scoured the ground ahead of him carefully, examining it for any insect, ant or worm, before he gingerly took his next step.

The palanquin was jolted by the irregular rhythm. Rahugana said in some annoyance from inside, 'What is the matter? What are you doing, fools?'

The other bearers trembled to think that he would have them whipped, which was the usual manner in which he rewarded ineptitude. The leader replied, 'Your majesty, we are doing our best, but the new man stops still after every step we take.'

Peering out of the palanquin, Rahugana spoke to Bharata, the brahmana, whose radiance remained hidden as a fire by ashes. The king said sarcastically, 'My poor fellow! Exhausted, are you? You are so slightly built, and you've been carrying the load for so long and all on your own, with these other fools hardly helping you at all. And then, you are so old as well. But do your best for me, fellow.'

The journey resumed, and after exactly another step, Bharata stopped again and scrutinised the ground ahead of him for an arrow's length. The palanquin was jolted again, and the great kshatriya inside it. Frothing now, Rahugana cried, 'Fool! You are alive, but good as dead. Dare you disobey me? Don't you know who I am? If it's a thrashing you want, I will be happy to oblige.'

And incensed that the palanquin-bearer dared flout his will, the king went on to describe his own greatness and glory. The faintest smile dawned on Bharata, the brahmana's, lips. Ever so softly, with perfect enunciation, he said, 'You are angry, Kshatriya. You meant to hurt me with your scorn. But I am afraid you did not succeed. Shall I tell you why, O King?'

Something in the young man's voice seemed to take Rahugana's heart and mind in an ineluctable vice, and the king listened helplessly, as he had never listened to anyone or anything before. As for Bharata, it was the first time in this life that he was speaking coherently, yet he spoke with the utmost calm. 'You would certainly have hurt me if this body you were trying to insult was really my self. Besides, the life and death you speak of are the same thing, and it isn't real. Also, you think you are a king and I am your servant. But these relations are not real or permanent either.

There is no bearer or burden. There is no journey or destination. Besides, if you beat this body that you think is me, you will not be punishing me. The body is its own punishment. If you have it whipped it will be like kneading dough that is already as soft as it will ever become. For you see, Kshatriya, I may seem like a fool but in fact I am the Atman, that is real and permanent, and beyond everything you have tried to make me out to be.' And Bharata bent to pick up the king's litter again.

The king knew he was hearing revelation. What the strange palanquin-bearer said so quietly seized his soul, overwhelmed him. Rahugana leapt out of his palanquin, and with tears in his eyes, prostrated himself before the brahmana.

'Who are you, mighty Brahmana?' said the king. 'You go disguised as a fool, yet you wear the sacred thread and you have such power as I have never felt in any other man before. Are you an Avadhuta? Which one are you of the order of Dattatreya? Whose son are you? Where is your home? Why did you come here? I set out in search of Kapila Muni to glean some wisdom from him. But now it seems Kapila himself has come to me.

My lord, I am the king of the Sindhu and Sauvira countries. I do not fear Indra's vajra, the Lord Rudra's trisula, Yama's danda, or the astras of Agni, Vayu and Kubera. But listening to you and looking at you, I swear that I do fear you with all my heart. You have no attachments whatever, most holy one. You have infinite power I know; but you hide yourself behind this disguise of being a fool. You are beyond my understanding, and I am certain that not the keenest minds in the world can fathom you or what you say.'

The king paused, his heart still pounding at what Bharata had said to him, and more, at the strange brahmana's voice, the power in his eyes. Rahugana continued, 'I was going to ask Kapila Deva, who is Narayana incarnate, where I can find true refuge in this terrible samsara. My lord, are you Kapila, roaming the world disguised to observe the human condition? Ah, I cannot understand you at all, though I know beyond any doubt that you are a great master of the spirit. I beg you, forgive me that I dishonoured you in my arrogance of being a king. I am not worthy of taking the dust from your feet. Bless me, Guru, that I may cross safely over the sea of grief. I beg you teach me the Brahma Vidya.'

The brahmana smiled again, saying, 'You merely mouth the words of the wise that you have heard somewhere or been taught by rote. But I doubt that you will find true wisdom like that, for not in the Vedas will you find Truth.'

Bharata was moved with compassion for the king, who it appeared was a true seeker. He sat on a raised rock and the king sat at his feet as any sishya does with his Guru.

Bharata began, 'His mind causes a man to find either samsara or moksha. The mind is a plumbless repository of unconscious impressions and memories of past lives, of karma good and bad, of punya and paapa. When the mind is controlled by the three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, it is entangled helplessly in karma, lost in maya, the world of delusion. The jiva is bound in darkness and desire, and the cycle of births and deaths continues. Pleasure and pain rule the jiva, and he blindly plunges after every desire. According to which guna dominates, the man's life shall be higher or lower.

The mind is like the wick of a lamp. When the wick is dipped in ghee, it burns with the colour of the ghee, and its light and smoke have the qualities of that ghee. But when the ghee is exhausted, the wick burns on with its own natural light, and is then consumed and becomes ashes. So, too, the mind. When the mind burns with the light of the gunas, its flame is coloured by them. When the mind is freed of the gunas, it burns with its own light, consumes itself, and ceases to exist. Even as akasa, the cosmic ether, pervades all space, God pervades the universe. When the jiva frees itself of its desires and attachments, it conquers its six enemies and lights the lamp of its own wisdom. Then there will be no more birth and death for the jiva.

Only at the Lord's feet is there refuge from the forest of samsara, the labyrinthine forest of births and deaths. The path called karma leads into the dark forest. The only quest within this forest is for pleasure, for happiness. The mind is what limits the soul, the mind that is a condition created by maya. As long as the mind exists, it creates the states of waking and sleep and all their attendant bonds. The only astra to kill this supreme enemy is bhakti for the feet of the Lord Hari. Vishnu is the only Guru who can set you free.'

Rahugana said, 'Surely, you are that Lord himself who have come to me in a human form, to enlighten me. You are the Purusha, the Paramatman, who conceals yourself in the guise of a depraved brahmana. Your voice is like amrita to me. Your words are like an invaluable specific to a sick man. But forgive me if I do not grasp what you say entirely, though I know it is the absolute truth. I cannot understand what you said earlier about the palanquin, its bearer and the burden within it.'

The brahmana said, 'All three are only the earth, in different forms. You identify yourself with a transient form of the earth. You feel you are the king of the Sindhus. You make these poor souls, who are already weighed down with poverty and every other affliction, carry you around in a palanquin, and pay them nothing for what they do. You are hard-hearted, Kshatriya, but you call yourself a protector of the earth. How will the wise ever respect you?

All that lives and moves upon the earth was once earth and in time will return to being earth again. Only the forms and their functions differ. This earth itself is unreal, comprised of tiny particles dancing together for a short while in the universe. Again, the mind dreams the universe. So the earth does not exist outside the mind.

Only knowledge is real, perfect and complete. Only pure knowledge, untainted by passion or karma, is eternal and changeless. This is Brahma gyana. The knowledge of the Brahman is not to be had from severe tapasya, not through Vedic yagnas or generous daana. It cannot be attained by grihastasrama, the chanting and study of the Vedas, not through the worship of Agni, Varuna or Surya Deva. You can only find the Brahman by serving the Rishis of the earth, as if you were the dust on their feet, and having their blessing.

Only in the conclaves of the wise will you hear the legends of the Lord. By listening to these every day, your mind will turn to bhakti, and only with bhakti for Vasudeva can moksha be had.'

The uncanny brahmana paused to smile slightly at Rahugana, 'Kshatriya, in another life, I was once a king. My name was Bharata and I was Rishabha's son. I renounced all that, and my wife and my sons, too, and took sannyasa. But then, a strange attachment took grip of me, when I was so close to attaining what I had set out to. I grew devoted to a young deer in the forest.

I left off even my worship for this attachment, and I was born as a deer in my last life. But my bhakti for Krishna helped me, and though I was an animal I remembered my past life and who I was, and what I wanted to achieve. When the deer died, this brahmana was born. I have striven to remain detached in this life, and to keep Narayana's feet as my only goal. That is why I never tell who I am, but allow God to treat my body as he will, and lead me wherever he cares to. Only the constant memory of Hari can free a man of samsara and its delusions. Take up the sword of knowledge, O King, and sever the knots of attachment in your heart.'

He paused and Rahugana sat entranced, waiting for the voice to speak again, the voice that spoke to a silent place in his soul of which he had never suspected the existence. Softly still, the brahmana continued, 'The jivas of this world are like a company of merchants, intent on acquiring the wealth they imagine pleasure to be. They roam the forest of samsara on their ceaseless quest, in vain, and find no joy anywhere. Six brigands follow the company of merchants everywhere, like a pack of hungry wolves. One by one, they pick off those that stray from the safety of the herd, or those that grow weak with age or sin, and lag behind.

The merchants see gandharva cities in the sky at times; but they vanish like the illusions they are, and the insects of the thickets continue to sting them. In other parts of the jungle of samsara, the jivas see spirits flying past like flares. Here and there, they find irresistible whirlwinds that carry them blindly along for some way, then drop them as suddenly as they picked them up. These are women, who seduce and then abandon a man; the jiva finds himself deeper in the jungle and more lost than ever.

Invisible crickets gossip endlessly in the undergrowth, forever backbiting. At times, owls hoot rudely in their very faces, startling the merchants, frightening them. In hunger and thirst, the jivas resort to evil trees for succour; but they are invariably poisoned by these, led astray, or betrayed. Then there are the regular mirages of blissful cities and sylvan peaceful glades and groves of plenty, which vanish as soon as they are approached.

Here and there, the forest burns viciously, and consumes some of their number. In others, yakshas and yakshis drink their blood. Occasionally, in the company and homes of near and dear ones, the jiva imagines he has found eternal rest. But he is swiftly disillusioned. Some of the merchants attempt scaling lofty mountains they see. They invariably fail, and at great cost to their health, and sustain dreadful injuries along the stubborn, vain way. Finally, they give up, accepting that the peak of the mountain is chimerical.

Some merchants are swallowed by great pythons, and lie in deep darkness for aeons, unconscious. Others are stung by cobras and vipers and fall into plumbless wells, where they lie in a blind night, forgotten, lost for an age, while the well-mouths are covered by grass and bushes. Some run after forbidden honey – other men's wives – and are stung by fierce bees. Heat, cold, storms, enmities, thirst and hunger, every manner of disease and suffering, all these plague the caravan of merchants, endlessly. They cheat one another, but walk the same lost path, surrounded by ominous darkness. None have yet returned to the place from where they began; none have found the home they lost.'

Rahugana listened spellbound. The brahmana's flow of language was so lucid, his voice was so enchanting, and all that he said spoke to the kshatriya's deepest soul. Bharata continued, 'Their trail is littered with the dead they leave, and never find again. Helplessly, they range the labyrinth that expands with each step they take, always leading them further astray, deeper into enmity and hatred. Time is stained with countless wars, the earth with the blood of countless kshatriyas. They die and are born again, but they find no sanctuary from fear and sorrow, from violence and death. They do not come to the tapovana where the sannyasi has discovered the only treasure worth having: the gold of freedom, of moksha.

In terror of death, of the hunting lions in the undergrowth, the company of merchants walks the ways of heretics, and finds more fear. The caravan shuns the way of hamsas, the swans! It sports with the monkeys of the forest, and forgets its destination, and even that there was once a destination it set out to seek.

O King, you too walk the way of the merchants. Lay down the sceptre in your hand that binds you in the night of delusion. See all men not as your slaves, but your own self. Detach yourself from the pleasures of women and children, and most of all, from those of power. The road you are walking does have an end; there is a way out of the catacomb of samsara. There is a light where all paths converge. Seek that place; find that light.'

Rahugana said, 'You fill my mind with such peace, Mahatman! Surely, a human birth is the most blessed one that one can listen to the legends of the Blue God from holy ones like you. Why, I do not envy the Devas anymore. May foolish kshatriyas like me always have the fortune to encounter Avadhutas like you and have your blessings.'

Rahugana prostrated himself at Bharata's feet. Bharata blessed him, then the two parted. In time, Rahugana renounced his throne and took to sannyasa. Bharata, the brahmana, wandered the earth as an Avadhuta for as long as Narayana chose to keep his body alive. Finally, his mortal elements were subsumed into the infinite Brahman, and Rishabha's son found moksha," said Suka Deva to Parikshit.

BHARATA'S DYNASTY

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "THIS SACRED LAND IS NAMED BHARATAVARSHA after Rishabha's immortal son. Truly, Suka, the holy men of the elder days were very different from those of our times. They were wilder and probably more free as well."

Suka said, "As the ages dwindle, men do as well. The expressions of freedom may differ today, but the eternal spirit, the Atman, and the destination of every jiva remains the same. In this kali yuga, moksha is to be more easily had than in any of the other ages. Bhakti suffices to free a man of the bondage of births and deaths. No great deeds or sacrifices are expected of him, just chanting the Lord's holy names liberates a man in the age of accumulated sins, this vile age of darkness and wrath."

Parikshit wanted to know, "Who were Bharata's sons? And who their sons? Tell me about all his descendants."

Suka replied, "Twenty-five generations are as follows – Bharata begot Sumati; Sumati's son was Devajit, whose son was Devadyumna, whose son was Paramesthi, who sired Pratiha, whose son was Pratiharta, whose son was Bhuman, who fathered Udgitha and Prastava, who sired Vibhu, whose son was Prithusena, whose son was Nakta, whose son was Gaya, who begot Chitraratha, who begot Samrat, who begot Marichi, who begot Binduman, who begot Madhu, who begot Viravrata, who begot Manthu, who fathered Bhauvana, whose son was Tvastar, whose son was Viraja, who fathered Satrajita and his ninety-nine brothers."

Parikshit said, "Tell me a little more of these kings of men, holy one."

Suka said, "Bharata's son Sumati followed his grandfather Rishạbha's path. In the kali yuga, heretics shall worship him as an Avatara. Sumati's wife was Vriddhasena, and on her he sired the prince Devajit, who vanquished Indra's Devas in battle and ruled Amravati as well as the earth.

Devajit's wife Aasuri bore him a son called Devadyumna. Devadyumna's queen was Dhenumati and their son was Paramesthi. Paramesthi's queen Sauvarchala bore him the prince called Pratiha, who followed the way of the Brahman, taught the secret vidya to many and finally attained nirvana himself.

Pratiha's son by his wife, another Sauvarchala, was Pratiharta. Pratiharta married Stuti and she had two sons Aja and Bhuman. Bhuman had two wives, Rishikulya and Devakulya. The first bore him Udgitha and Devakulya bore him Prastava. Prastava's queen was Niyutsa and their son was Vibhu.

Vibhu's queen was Rati and she bore him Prithusena, who begot Nakta on his wife Akuti. Nakta and his queen Druti's son was Gaya, the great, who was perfectly sattvika and an amsa of Vishnu. He attained Brahmagyana while ruling the earth and was said to be beyond pride of any sort. The Rishis have said of Gaya: 'Which king of the earth can be Gaya's equal, unless a ray of the light of Lord Vishnu has been manifested in him?'

When Gaya was crowned, Daksha's divine daughters, Sraddha, Maitri, Daya and the others, came with the sacred rivers of the earth, Ganga, Yamuna and the rest, to sprinkle holy water over the kshatriya's head. Just as a cow gives milk when she sees her calf, the earth gave of herself in a tide of plenitude when she saw Gaya crowned. No enemy could stand against Gaya in battle for, being without desire, he was the immaculate warrior.

Indra got drunk on the Soma rasa at Gaya's great Rajasuya yagna, and it is told that Narayana himself appeared to take the havis that Nakta's son offered.

Gaya married Gayanti, and sired three sons by her – Chitraratha, Sugati and Avarodhana. Chitraratha's queen was Oorna and her son was Samrat. Samrat married Utkala, and their son was Marichi. Marichi and Bindumati's son was Binduman. His wife was Saragha, and she bore him the prince called Madhu. Madhu's queen was Sumanas, and their son was Viravrata. Viravrata's queen was Bhojaa and their sons were Manthu and Pramanthu.

Manthu's queen was Sathya and she bore him Bhauvana. Bhauvana married Dushana, and their son was Tvastha. Tvastha and Virochana's son was called Viraja. Viraja's wife Visuchi bore him a hundred sons of whom Shatajit was the eldest.

Viraja was the last king of Priyavrata's line and it was told of him that he adorned his ancestors' dynasty as Vishnu does the host of Devas," Suka Deva told Parikshit.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF LEGEND

PARIKSHIT SAID, "YOU HAVE DESCRIBED THE DIMENSIONS OF THE EARTH over which the sun shines, and the moon and the stars. You said that Priyavrata's chariot made seven furrows upon the earth's face, and these filled with sacred water and became the seven seas, while the land that remained between the seas were the seven dwipas, the island-continents. Tell me about these in more detail now, Suka Deva. For, this material universe is also the gross form of the Lord, upon whom I want to meditate."

Suka said with a smile, "No man, even if he lives as long as a God, can comprehend the dimensions of the Lord, or begin to understand his endless glories. But listen to the dimensions and character of the oceans and the continents.

We live, as you know, on Jambudwipa, which is the inmost of all the continents. It is a hundred thousand yojanas wide, and shaped like the round leaf of a lotus. In this dwipa there are nine varshas, sub-continents, each one nine thousand yojanas wide. They are divided by eight mountain ranges.

The inmost of the varshas is Ilavrata. At the heart of Ilavrata, golden Meru, lord of all mountains, thrusts his head towards the stars. Meru is the corolla of the lotus that is the earth; from him, all the continents unfurl. He stands thirty-two thousand yojanas tall.

To the north of Ilavrata are three immense ranges – Nila, Sweta and Sringavan. They divide the sub-continents called Ramyaka, Hiranmaya and Kuru. They stretch away to the salt sea and are roughly two thousand yojanas wide, each. Every outer varsha is a tenth part wider than the one immediately behind it.

South of Ilavrata are the ranges Nishada, Hemakuta and Himalaya. They run from east to west and are ten thousand yojanas high, exactly like Nila, Hiranmaya and Kuru. They separate the varshas called Harivarsha, Kimpurusha and Bharata.

East and west of Ilavrata sweep the ranges Malyavat and Gandhamadana, also two thousand yojanas long each. They bound Ketumala and Bhadrasva.

Like guardians on four sides of Meru stand four ranges, each one ten thousand yojanas high: Mandara, Merumandara, Suparshva and Kumuda. On each of these four mountains four gigantic trees grow, like banners – a Mango, a Jambu rose apple, a Kadamba and a Nyagrodha banyan. Each ancestral tree is a thousand yojanas tall, and their trunks a hundred yojanas round. Each mountain has a great lake upon it – of milk, of honey, of sugarcane juice and of fresh water. Any beings of the semi-divine races, the gandharvas, kinnaras, charanas and kimpurushas that drink from these lakes instantly acquire great siddhis.

Each mountain range has a celestial garden growing upon it, of incomparable beauty and enchantment. They are named Nandana, Chaitra, Vaibhrajaka and Sarvatobhadra. The magnificent Devas come to sport and to make love in these gardens, with troupes of gandharvas and apsaras singing and dancing for them.

From the great mango tree, fruit big as mountain peaks fall onto the higher slopes of Mandara. They burst open and their juice flows into the river Arunoda, staining its sweet and fragrant water a deep red colour. It flows down into the eastern portion of Ilavrata. Parvati's sakhis, the young yaksha women, bathe in and drink the crimson waters of this river and their bodies are scented with the redolent juice, and fill the air for ten yojanas around.

So also, jambu fruit, big as elephants, their seed fine as dewdrops, fall from the rose apple tree growing on the summit of Merumandara. The river Jambu flows with their juice and over the southern lands of Ilavrata. The clay on both sides of the river is transformed into gold, and the devas, kinnaras, gandharvas and all the other divine ones wear crowns, necklaces, girdles and other ornaments made of Jambunada, as the gold is called.

On the mountain Suparshva grows the kadamba. From five hollows upon its immeasurable trunk flow five rivers of honey. The air the gods exhale, who drink this honey, spreads a delirious rapture for a hundred yojanas around. These five flow into a single river that waters the eastern countries of Ilavrata.

So, too, the immortal tree called Shatavalsa grows on the crest of Mount Kumuda. From the hundred thousand arms of that ancient banyan flow streams of wishes, which confer their every desire on those who drink their water. The myriad streams flow in the northern kingdoms of Ilavrata and beings that bathe in them or drink their water never suffer from any disease, and enjoy supreme bliss all their lives.

Like filaments growing inside a great lotus, twenty mountains surround Meru on all sides – Kuranga, Kurara, Kusumbha, Vaikanka, Trikuta, Sisira, Patanga, Ruchaka, Nishada, Sinivasa, Kapila, Sankha, Vaidurya, Jarudhi, Hamsa, Rishabha, Naga, Kalanjara and Narada, beside the other ranges I have named.

The ranges of Jathara and Devakuta are to the east of Meru; they run north for eighteen thousand yojanas. They are two thousand yojanas wide and tall. To Meru's west, the ranges Pavana and Pariyatra tower. To the south are Kailasa and Karavira, to the north are Trisringa and Makara. Encased by these eight ranges, golden Meru shines like the flame of agni surrounded by blades of kusa grass.

On the summit of Meru, say those that have seen it, is Sata-Kumbhi, Brahma's splendorous city. It is a square city and measures ten thousand yojanas on every side. Surrounding it are other cities, eight of them, one for each of the Gods of the eight directions. Each one resembles Brahma's city, but is exactly a fourth its size.

To the east is Indra's capital, Amravati; to the south-east is Agni's city Tejovati; to the south is Yama's Samyamini; the Nairritas rule Krishnangana south-west of Brahma's city; due west is Vana's capital Sraddhavati; north-west is Vayu's fragrant city of airs, Gandhavati; to the north Kubera's Mahodaya, city of the great dawn, and north-east Rudra's Yasovati."

Suka paused, then continued, "During the mighty Asura Mahabali's yagna, Vishnu appeared as the splendid Dwarf, the Vamana. He asked Bali for three paces of land. With his first step, the Avatara covered all the earth. When he raised his left foot to span the heavens, the nail on the thumb toe of his foot cracked the Cosmic Egg. Through the crack cascaded a river and covered the Egg entirely. The river then washed the feet of the Lord, and her waters were tinted red with the dust from his feet. As she washed that dust or dirt, she washed away all the sins of the earth, where the Vamana had set foot earlier. Yet she herself remained pure.

She, that river, was called Bhagavatapadi, born from the feet of the Lord. Only after a thousand yugas, did she flow down the sky in the north, the region of the firmament called Vishnupada. There, even today, Dhruva sprinkles his head with her sacred waters, saying fervently, 'This river flows from the feet of the God of our family!' Every day his bhakti swells. He forgets himself in the memory of the Blue God and tears of ecstasy course down his face, while his hair stands on end.

As she flows down the heavens, the seven Sages, the Saptarishi, receive her sacred waters next upon the matted locks of their jata, even as men who want moksha and nothing else would receive nirvana. It is told, O Kshatriya, that the Saptarishi are content to have the river of the stars flow on their heads; there is nothing else they desire. They are indifferent even to moksha.

Then, she falls down the path of the Devas, teeming with subtle vimanas, and flows down to the zone of the Moon. After flooding the lunar mandala, she descends onto the summit of golden Meru, to Brahma's secret city. Upon Meru, she, the Bhagavatapadi, truncates herself into four streams – Sita, Alakananda, Chakshu and Bhadra. These flow down the mountain in the four directions and flow into the ocean, Varuna lord of all rivers and streams, great and small.

From Brahma's hidden city of gold, the Sita flows down Mount Kesara and onto the summit of Gandhamadana. She then flows across the continent Bhadrasva, and into the salt sea in the east.

So, too, the Chakshus – the Oxus or Amu-Daria – descends from the peak of Mount Malyavan. She hurtles down across Ketumala and flows into the western sea.

The Bhadra falls down Meru to the north. Gushing down many ranges, she cascades from the peak of Mount Sringavat, traverses the country of northern Kuru and seeks the northern sea.

The Alakananada flows south from Brahma's city on earth. She finds Hemakuta and thence the Himalaya. She flows south across Bharatavarsha and into the southern sea. Men who bathe in her sacred waters are blessed with the punya of performing the greatest yagnas – the Rajasuya, the Aswamedha, and the others, with every step they take along their pilgrimage.

A thousand other rivers, big and small, flow through the continents; they are all daughters of Meru and the other mountains.

There are many kinds of swargas, which are known by their specific location through the three realms: Swarga, Bhumi and Patala. The Rishis say that of all the continents, the varshas, only Bharatavarsha is a karma kshetra: where men determine their own destinies by their deeds; and their worship, or the lack of it. The other eight varshas are swargas, where celestial beings come to enjoy unexhausted punya from other lives. The beings of these varshas live ten thousand years. They are like Gods – their bodies like adamant, strong as ten thousand elephants, eternally youthful, awesomely virile and profoundly feminine. They enjoy conjugal lives that men and women of Bharatavarsha can scarcely begin to imagine. Only once, in their final year of sexual ecstasy, do the women conceive. Across these eight continents, Time has the eternal characteristics of a treta yuga, the age of extreme, rapturous sensual enjoyment.

The eight varshas abound in enchanted forests, where the godlike men and women dally endlessly, to their great hearts' content. The Gods are worshipped in the eight varshas, in charmed valleys that divide the mountain ranges that separate these continents. The mystic valleys abound with sacred asramas, and exquisite apsaras. Here are crystalline lakes, of unworldly beauty and purity, on which every species of water birds swim. Regal swans glide majestically through banks of lotuses blooming in phosphorescent colours.

Vishnu Narayana has his presence in all nine continents, in myriad avataras.

In Ilavrita, because of the Devi Parvati's ancient curse, the Lord Siva is the only male to be found: for any other male of any race or species entering Ilavrita is instantly transformed into a woman! Upon Ilavrita, Siva is served by millions of women. Of all these, of course, Parvati Devi is undisputed queen. Siva remains absorbed in dhyana. It is told that, often, he meditates upon the Lord Vishnu, also called Vasudeva."

Sri Suka paused, musing upon his inner vision of the continents he was describing to the king.

Parikshit urged him to continue, "What of the other varshas, my lord?"

"In Bhadrasva, Dharma Deva's son Bhadrasravas rules, with his clan around him. They keep the Lord Hari's form enshrined in their hearts. They call him Hayasiras, and worship him with the mantra *AUM Namo Bhagavate Dharmayatma-Vishnodhanaya Namah.*

They recount the legend of how the Lord Vishnu became Hayagriva, the horse-headed One, to retrieve the Veda from Patala, where the Asura Madhu had hidden the Holy Book at the end of the kalpa, when the universe was dissolved. It was Hayagriva who returned the immortal Veda to Brahma.

In Harivarsha, Vishnu dwells as the Narasimha. In that precious Form, his Asura devotee Prahlada, the incomparable, worships him, as do all the inhabitants of that varsha. Prahlada rules Harivarsha, by Hari's infinite grace. He offers worship with the arcane syllables so dear to the Man-lion: *Aum Kshraum.* Prahlada gently persuades his demons to abandon the life of the householder, which he tells them is the main impediment to moksha. He persuades them to abandon every attachment and surrender themselves to Narasimha, the fierce, tender Deliverer.

In Ketumala varsha, Vishnu is Kamadeva, the God of Love, with his Lakshmi beside him, and pleasing her in every manner is his only aim. Prajapati's sons, who rule the day, and his daughters, who rule the night, thirty-six thousand of them, live with them. At the end of each year, Vishnu sends forth the blinding Sudarshana Chakra across this world, and the devis of the night abort their unborn babies.

Kama delights his own senses and brings sweet ecstasy to the Devi Lakshmi, why, just by looking at her and she at him. She worships him with the Hrishikesha mantra, and the bija mantras *Aum, Hram, Hrim, Hrum*, the seeds from which all other mantras have sprouted.

She says to him: *You are the only master of my body and my mind; you are the one who rules the sixteen kalas; you are the Veda; you are the food that sustains me; you are the blissful soul; you are the pervader, the source of all strength and potency; you are the beloved Lord, and I bow to you.*

And this is a small part of the prayers she offers him, always in a delirium of love.

In the Ramyaka varsha, Vaivasvata Manu rules, for whose sake Vishnu manifested himself as the Matsya once, when that king was Satyavrata, in another life. This Manu still worships the Lord as the great Fish, the silvery redeemer.

In Hiranmaya varsha, Narayana is the Kuurma, the primordial Tortoise. Aryaman, sovereign of the manes, worships the fabulous Lord, who bore Mandara upon his back once, when the Devas and the Asuras churned the sea of milk for the amrita of immortality.

In the land of the northern Kurus, the Lord dwells as Varaha, the primeval Boar, who raised the earth from the deeps upon his great tusks. Here, Bhumi Devi and the Kurus worship him with the most esoteric mantra:

Aum Namo Bhagavate Mantra-tattva-lingaya Yagna-kratava-mahadhvaravayavaya Mahapurushaya Namah Karma-shuklaya Triyugaya Namaste! I worship you who can be reached only through the mantras; who are both kinds of sacrifice; whose every limb is made of mahayagnas; who alone performs flawless karma; who manifests himself in the three yugas. Lord, I bow to you.

In Kimpurusha varsha, the greatest bhakta of all, Hanuman the magnificent rules. He worships his Rama ceaselessly, blissfully, as do the kimpurushas of that continent. Hanuman never tires of listening to the legend of his Lord, Sita's husband, Lakshmana's elder brother, sung here by Arishtinemi and the gandharvas. And he himself frequently breaks into song, in his incomparable voice.

You are the king of kings, sings Hanuman, *you are AUM. You are the Maryada Purushottaman, of perfect character and karma, your mind perfectly restrained, immaculately serving your subjects. I seek refuge in you, who are satchitananda, who are the Parabrahman. You are the perfect Avatara, O my Rama, detached, absolutely loving, no-one like you through all time. You are the indweller, the friend of the Sage, you are the Atman and the Paramatman, too. You are the sanctuary of all the world, of gods, men and monkeys. You are he who took all his people into heaven with him!*

In this Bharatavarsha, too, the Lord pervades everything. He is the antaryamin and is known as Nara Narayana, the twin Avatara. He remains unmanifested, and performs tapasya for us all until the very end of the kalpa. It is his unseen ubiquitous dhyana that swells dharma on earth. His meditation brings knowledge, renunciation, mystic siddhis, restraint, freedom from ahamkara, and, finally, moksha.

Narada Muni, Brahma's son, awesome wanderer, worships the Lord in Bharatavarsha. He gave deeksha to the Muni Savarni, who would become the Manu of the coming manvantara, initiating the Sage into the Panchatantra, which combines the Samkhya philosophy and the way of karma. Narada adores the Lord in Bharatavarsha, as do all the men and women of the four varnas.

Narada worshipped the Blue God thus: *I bow to you who are entirely glorious, who are completely serene, who personifies the AUM, who are untouched by ahamkara. I prostrate myself at your feet, O Nara Narayana, who belong to all those that have no belongings. I bow to you again and again, who are the Guru of the Paramahamsas, the master of those who see their joy within their own souls. I worship you who are so detached that you are hardly aware that you are the Master of Creation. Lord, I implore you, favour me with true bhakti that is beyond vibhakti; sever the knot in the heart that binds me to my* *body, my delusion of being apart from you, this bond of maya, of samsara. Lord set me free.*

Numerous are the rivers and mountains just in this Bharatavarsha. Some of the mountains are Malaya, Mangalaprastha, Mainaka, Trikuta, Rishabha, Kootaka, Kollaka, Sahya, Devagiri, Rishyamooka, Srisaila, Venkata, Mahendra, Varidhara, Vindhya, Shuktiman, Rikshagiri, Pariyatra, Drona, Chitrakoota, Govardhana, Raivataka, Kakubha, Neela, Gokamukha, Indrakila, Kamagiri and hundreds more. A thousand rivers and streams spring in these mountains and flow down across the plains of Bharata to the sea.

The people of Bharatavarsha bathe in these holy rivers, to purify not only their bodies but their spirits. Why, many purify themselves just by chanting the names of the sacred rivers of Bharatavarsha.

Main among these innumerable streams are Chandravasa, Tamraparni, Avatoda, Kritamala, Vaihayasi, Kaveri, Veni, Payasvini, Sharkaravarta, Tungabhadra, Krishna, Venya, Bheemarathi, Godavari, Nirvindhya, Payoshni, Tapi, Reva, Surasa, Narmada, Charmanvati, Sindhu, Brahmaputra, Sona, Mahanadi, Vedasmriti, Rishikulya, Trishama, Kaushiki, Mandakini, Yamuna, Saraswati, Drishadwati, Gomati, Sarayu, Rodasvati, Saptavati, Sushoma, Shatadru, Chandrabhaga, Marudvridha, Vitastha, Asikhni, Viswa and many more.

In the land of Bharata, jivas receive births according to their karma. Karma is of three kinds: sattvic or white; rajasic or red; and tamasic or black. Birthlessness, hence deathlessness, is to be had only from the worship of Vasudeva. This bhakti begins from seeking or being blessed with finding the company of great Sages, bhaktas themselves, who have the Lord's grace upon them. Even the Devas are eager to be born human, in the varsha of Bharata, for they always say that it is in such a birth that all the purusharthas may be realised: dharma, artha, kama and even moksha, which the Gods themselves find difficult to attain. Only by the grace of Mukunda Krishna does a jiva receive such a birth, and the golden opportunity to serve the Lord and find eternal liberation and bliss. How devoutly the Devas yearn for a human birth in the land of Bharatavarsha, and how commonly the fortunate ones who do attain such a birth squander it!

The wise have always maintained that a brief human life in the land of Bharata is preferable to a life a whole kalpa long in another realm, even a life full of the sweetest pleasures of a swarga. For even a kalpa will surely come to an end, and then the jivatma must be born again. Whereas a birth in Bharatavarsha can bestow nirvana on a jiva, free him forever from the bonds of samsara.

Even the realm of Brahma himself, they say, cannot be compared with the Holy Land of Bharata: for this is the land where the legends of Narayana flow like rivers across the length and breadth of the continent, through its days and nights as prayer and song, as sacrifice and festival. Yet, countless are they who are born into the blessed varsha and waste themselves in pursuits other than seeking the grace of Krishna. These are like wildfowl that escape briefly from a fowler's net, but return carelessly to play on the branches of the very tree in which they were once caught.

Yet, all beings with any punya pray to be born human in the land of Bharatavarsha: Ajanaabha, the land of sacred rite. For here, more than in any other realm, the Lord Vishnu blesses those that worship him."

Suka continued, "Kshatriya, Jambudwipa has eight lesser continents attached to it. They were created when Sagara's sons excavated the earth to find their father's sacrificial horse. They are Svarna Prastha, Chandra Shukla, Avartana, Ramanaka, Mandaraharina, Panchajanya, Simhala and Lanka."

THE SIX OTHER DWIPAS

SUKA RESUMED HIS PURANA, "JUST AS MOUNT MERU IS SURROUNDED by Jambudwipa, Jambu is encircled by a sea of salt as great as the continent. The salt sea is in the midst of another dwipa called Plaksha, which is twice as great as the sea. Here the immense plaksha tree grows, the golden fig, just as the jambu, the rose apple, does in the previous dwipa. The pristine tree is golden, and seven-tongued Agni Deva dwells at its foot. Plaksha is ruled by Priyavrata's son Idhmajihva. He divided his island into seven varshas, and gave one to each of his seven sons, and named each one after one prince. When he had done this, Idhmajihva absorbed himself in mahasamadhi and found moksha.

The varshas of Plaksha dwipa are Siva, Yavasa, Subhadra, Shanta, Kshema, Amrita and Abhaya. There are seven great mountains and rivers in each of these varshas. The seven mountains that form the frontiers between the varshas of Idhmajihva's sons are Manikuta, Vajrakuta, Jyotishman, Suparna, Hiranyashtiva, and Meghamala, the cloud-garlanded.

The main rivers, which demarcate the boundaries of the varshas, are Aruna, Angirasi, Savitri, Suprabhata, Ritambhara and Satyambhara. The four varnas of Plaksha, known as Hamsa, Patanga, Urdhvayana and Satyanga use these river waters to wash away their rajas and tamas. These beings live a thousand years. They are godlike in appearance, and their bodies are free from sweat, tiredness and other weaknesses. Their sons and daughters are as magnificent and pure as they are. They worship the Atman and the Lord Surya Deva, who is the gate of heaven, who is eulogised in the three Vedas.

They pray, *We seek refuge in Surya Deva, who is the ancient Vishnu's avatara, who is the God of satya, the truth, and rta, the divine law, the Veda, and who is the disperser of the fruit of good and evil karma.*

In every one of the five dwipas beyond Plaksha dwipa, all beings, with no exceptions, are magnificent in their limbs, long-lived, virile, lustrous, powerful, blessed with great gifts of body and mind, and superhuman courage. To men of the earth, they are certainly like Gods.

Plaksha dwipa is surrounded by the sugarcane juice sea, which is approximately as vast as the dwipa itself. Salmali dwipa is twice as big as that sea, and it stands shining in the midst of the sea of wine that encompasses Salmali.

In Salmali dwipa stands the gigantic salmali tree, a silk cotton tree as great as the giant plaksha. The Rishis say that upon this tree awesome Garuda has his nest, the king of all birds, Vishnu's mount, whose wings are the Vedas.

Priyavrata's son Yagnabahu rules Salmali dwipa. He, too, divided his vast kingdom into seven varshas, gave them to his seven sons, and named them after those princes: Surochana, Saumanasya, Ramanaka, Devavarsha, Paribhadra, Apyayana and Avijnata.

Seven mountain ranges separate those continents and seven rivers, too. The mountains are Svarasa, Shatasringa, Vamadeva, Kunda, Mukunda, Pushpavarsha and Sahasrasruti. The rivers are called Anumati, Sinivali, Saraswati, Kuhu, Rajani, Nanda and Raka.

The men of this dwipa are divided in four varnas: Srutadhara, Viryadhara, Vasundhara and Isandhara. They worship the Atman as Soma, the Moon, who is the incarnate Veda.

They pray: *The Moon, who divides the month into the dark and bright fortnights, who with his rays conveys subtle foods to the manes and the Gods, in the dark and bright weeks, is our lord and ruler!*

Beyond the sea of wine, Suroda, which encircles Salmali, lies Kusa dwipa, contained by the sea of ghee equal to it. In Kusa dwipa grows a great clump of kusa grass, which the Lord himself planted there once. It is as brilliant as Agni, the Fire God, and lights up all the directions with its incandescent shoots like tongues of blinding fire.

Priyavrata son Hiranyaretas was the first sovereign of Kusa dwipa. He also divided his great lands in seven equal portions and bequeathed it to his seven sons, Vasu, Vasudhana, Dridharuchi, Nabhigupta, Stutyavrata, Vivikta and Vamadeva. Then, Hiranyaretas renounced his life and absorbed himself in dhyana.

The seven mountain boundaries of those varshas of Kusa dwipa are Chakra, Chatushringa, Kapila, Chitrakuta, Devanika, Urhdvaroma and Dravina. The seven great rivers are Rasakulya, Madhukulya, Mitravinda, Srutavinda, Devagarbha, Ghritachyuta and Mantramala.

The four varnas of Kusadwipa – Kusala, Kovida, Abhiyukta, Kulaka – worship the Lord as Agni Deva. They pray: *O Agni, you bear all offerings to Hari, who is the Brahman; we seek refuge in you as in the Brahman himself!*

Beyond the Ghritoda, the sea of which has the colour and appearance of clarified butter, there is the Krauncha dwipa, twice the size of that heavy ocean. This is contained by the sea of milk, Kshiroda, which is equal to the Krauncha dwipa in extent. Krauncha dwipa has its name from the awesome Krauncha mountain that stands at its heart. When Siva's son Karttikeya cast his spear of a thousand fires at this mountain, the Lord Varuna protected Krauncha with precious sprays from the Kshirasagara, which made the mountain immortal.

Priyavrata's son Ghritaprishta ruled Krauncha dwipa. He, also, divided his dwipa in seven varshas, and gave one kingdom to each of his seven sons, who were called Ama, Madhuruha, Meghaprishta, Sudhaman, Bhrajishta, Lohitarna and Vanaspati.

The seven mountains of Krauncha dwipa are Shukla, Vardhamana, Bhojana, Upabarhin, Nanda, Nandana and Sarvatobhadra. Its seven rivers are Abhaya, Amritaugha, Aryaka, Tirthavati, Vrittirupavati, Pavitravati and Shukla.

The four varnas of this dwipa are named Purusha, Rishabha, Dravina and Devaka. They purify themselves in those sacred rivers and worship the

Deva Varuna, praying: *You are the purifier of the three worlds, O Lord of rivers! Cleanse us of all our sins whenever we touch you!*

Encompassing the Kshiroda is Saka dwipa, and around that the sea that seems like curd. In Saka dwipa stands a mammoth Saka tree, whose delicate fragrance permeates the air of that dwipa. Priyavrata's son Medhatithi was the first king of Saka dwipa. He divided his blessed kingdom in seven and bequeathed those seven varshas to his seven sons: Purojava, Manojava, Pavamana, Dhumraika, Chitrarepha, Bahurupa and Viswadhara.

The seven great mountains of Saka dwipa are Isana, Urusringa, Balabhadra, Satakesara, Sahasrasrota, Devapala and Mahanasa. Its seven great rivers are Anagha, Ayurda, Ubhayasprishti, Aparajita, Panchapadi, Sahasrastuti and Nijadhriti. Its people are divided into the varnas Ritavrata, Stayvrata, Danavrata and Anuvrata. These have purified themselves into perfect sattva, washing their rajas and tamas with pranayama, worshipping God as Vayu the Wind, in quietude: *May He who controls all beings and lives from within, who enters our bodies as sacred prana, and sustains us as vital breath, over which we have no control, always protect us.*

Pushkara dwipa encompasses the sea of curd, and is contained by the next ocean: of limpid, sweet water. In Pushkara dwipa, a burnished golden lotus grows, of a hundred million lustrous petals, like immense flames. This is Brahma's throne, in which he sits. Just a single mountain looms at the heart of this dwipa, dividing the western and eastern continents. The Manasottara mountain is ten thousand yojanas square. At its four corners the four cities of the Lokapalas stand, of Indra, Yama, Varuna and Soma. Above it, Surya Deva's chariot ranges, as the year, circling Mount Meru, uttarayana and dakshinayana, the northern and southern migrations, six months each for humans, one day and night of the Devas.

Priyavrata's son Vitihotra first ruled Pushkara dwipa. His sons were Ramanaka and Dhataki. He made them kings, the guardians of the two varshas, and like his elder brothers became a sannyasi, spending his time just in worship of the Lord. The people of Pushkara worship Lord Brahma, with deep bhakti of the mind, which takes them to Brahmaloka. They pray thus: *We prostrate ourselves before the Creator, who is the fruit of all punya,* *who is the real path to the knowledge of Brahman, who is himself the Brahman, the final reality.*

Beyond the ocean of sweet water, is the ring of mountains called Lokaaloka that divides the realm upon which the sun shines, called Loka, from Aloka where never a ray of Surya falls. Beyond the fresh water sea is a land wide as the distance between Meru and Manasottara. And beyond this land is another realm of gold, smooth and bright as a mirror. This is a realm exclusive to the Gods, and no other being ever enters it, for if they do they never return. The Lord made the mountain Lokaaloka to circumscribe the three worlds, Bhumi, Swarga and Patala. It stands so tall that light from the Sun to the farther star, Dhruva of the North, falls over only the three worlds on this side of the mountain, but not to the realms on the other side.

The total extent of the worlds of creation is said to measure fifty crore yojanas by the ancients. The land from Meru to the mountain Lokaaloka is a fourth of that space. At the four cardinal points of the Lokaaloka mountain the Lords of elephants, Rishabha, Pushkarachuda, Vamana and Aparajita, stand: the Diggajas. Brahma, the Self-born Pitama, has put them there. They are the holders of the world; they keep all the realms stable. To make these greatest of beasts strong, and to infuse the Devas and the other guardians of creation with strength, the Lord himself abides within and on every side of Lokaaloka; he permeates his creation, subtly. He is always sattvika, embodying qualities like truth, justice, knowledge, renunciation, sovereignty and the profound, hermetic eight-fold mystic powers: the highest occult siddhis.

His hands holding cosmic weapons, he is surrounded always by his main attendants, Viswakshena and the others. He, the Glorious One, has assumed this Form until the kalpa ends: to nurture and protect all the different worlds that have evolved by his own fathomless yoga maya. The extent of the realms of Aloka can be measured by comparing them to Loka. And the lands beyond Aloka are immeasurable. Only the greatest masters of yoga can travel into them and return: as Krishna did when he brought back the Brahmana Sandipani's dead son.

The Sun shines at the heart of the golden Egg, the universe, the midpoint of the akasa, the ethereal space between the earth and the sky. The distance from the sun to the edge of the universe is twenty-five crores of yojanas. The Sun is called Martanda, being inside the unenlivened egg. He is also called Hiranyagarbha, pregnant with the Golden Egg. Surya, God of light, demarcates the cardinal points, the celestial regions, the earth, the realms of pleasure – bhuvarloka and svarloka – and moksha, the underworlds and every world in existence. Surya Deva is the Atman, the Soul, who is the Lord of the vision and awareness of the Devas, the sight of men, sub-human beings, reptiles, plants, and every living creature," said Suka Deva, the blessed, to his rapt audience, the king Parikshit.

THE SUN

SUKA CONTINUED, "BETWEEN THE SPHERE OF HEAVEN AND THE sphere of the earth, lie the intermediate realms: the antariksha, touched by heaven from above and the earth below. At the heart of the sky, Surya Deva burns, illumining, heating the three worlds. The lord of luminaries moves north for the six months of the summer solstice, uttarayana, and south for the six of the winter solstice, dakshinayana. During the vernal and autumnal equinoxes he is upon the equator.

When the Sun crosses the signs of Aries and Libra, the rasis Mesha and Thula, day and night, are of equal length. When he is in the five signs from Virshabha to Kanya, Taurus to Virgo, the days lengthen and the nights decrease by a ghatika, twenty-four minutes, every month. When he moves through the rasis Vrishchika to Meena, Scorpio and Pisces, the reverse happens, the days are shorter in the northern hemisphere and the nights longer. It is said the sun journeys nine and a half crore yojanas on his orbit around the Manasottara mountain.

Upon Manasottara, to the east of Meru, stands Indra's magnificent city: Devadhani, capital of the Devas. To Meru's south, is Yama, the Lord of Death and ruler of the southern realms' capital, Samyamani. To the west, is Varuna's city Nimlochani and to the north is the silvery city of Soma, the Moon. As Surya passes through these cities, the earth has sunrise, high noon, sunset and midnight: the times of activity and rest for the denizens of the four quarters. For those that live upon Meru, it is always bright midday.

The seat of the Sun's chariot is thirty-six lakh yojanas wide, as is its yoke. The legless Aruna, Garuda's brother, is Surya Deva's charioteer, who sits before him and holds his chariot reins, always facing the west out of reverence for his master. The extraordinary and minute Rishis, the Valakhilyas, sixty thousand of them, each the size of the fourth part of a thumb, sit before Surya Deva and sing his praises with hymns from the Veda. The other great Munis, the gandharvas, apsaras, nagas, yakshas, yatudhanas and Devas all serve the Lord, the Supreme Atman who dwells in the Sun's blazing heart, ritually, every month.

The chariot of the Sun God flies two thousand and two yojanas each moment."

THE MOON AND THE PLANETS

PARIKSHIT SAID, "YOU SAY THAT SURYA DEVA IS THE SUPREME LORD, the Paramatman?"

Suka replied, "He is indeed Narayana himself, cause of the universe. The Munis investigate his nature by studying the Vedas, the books of hymnal revelations. For the welfare of all the created, the Lord truncated his body in twelve parts. He created the seasons, heat and cold, the spring, summer, autumn and winter. He ruled these and their natures and characteristics. All these are bound to karma and its fruit. In this world, men worship the Lord, performing the dharma of their varnas, during the different asramas of life, as laid down in the Veda. With devout rituals, and with dhyana and tapasya, they come finally to moksha, eternal bliss.

A solar month is a day and a night of the ancestors, the bright and dark fortnights. The Sun traverses two and a quarter constellations during this time. A season, a ritu, is the time the Sun takes to cover a sixth of his orbit. An ayana is six months.

The Moon travels more swiftly than the Sun. In two fortnights, Soma Deva covers the distance that Surya travels in an entire year; in two days and a fourth, he covers a sign of the zodiac, which takes the Sun a month; and in a day, the distance that Surya takes a fortnight to journey. The dark and bright fortnights of the waning and waxing moon are the night and the day of the Pitrs and the Devas. Soma Deva is the lord of planets; he is their very prana and sustains them with his precious rays. He conjoins with each constellation for thirty muhurtas, twenty-four hours.

When he is full, his sixteen digits shine forth. He is the God of the mind, the lord of food and an amsa, an embodiment of amrita, nectar. The Munis say he is one with all creatures, the one that nourishes the gods, the manes, men, spirits dark and bright, ghouls and goblins (bhutas, pretas and pisachas), animals, plants, reptiles, all forms of life. Twenty-eight constellations the Moon travels across each month. Two lakhs of yojanas above these, is Sukra Deva, Venus, who travels with the Sun, at times before him, at others after. He is always benign, the bringer of rain, who nullifies the negative influences of the more malign planets such as Mars.

Budha Deva, Mercury, is the son of Soma. He is positioned two hundred thousand yojanas above Sukra. He is usually a benefic planet, but when he exceeds the Sun in velocity, the earth experiences storms and drought.

Two lakhs of yojanas above Budha is Mangala, Mars, which crosses each sign of the zodiac in three fortnights, six weeks. By and large, Mars is inauspicious, bringing evil.

Two hundred thousand yojanas beyond Mars is the magnificent Guru Brihaspati: the sublime Jupiter. Jupiter crosses each sign of the zodiac in a year, unless he is retrograde. He takes twelve years to cover the entire zodiac. He is the greatest benefic, especially for all things spiritual, brahmanical.

Two lakhs of yojanas beyond Brihaspati is the One that goes slowly, Sanaischara, Saturn. He remains thirty moons in each zodiacal sign, and takes thirty years to make a full revolution. He generally brings anxiety and evil, but is in his way a great teacher of the spirit. He bestows industriousness with pain and suffering.

Eleven hundred thousand yojanas above Saturn are the Saptarishi, the seven Sages, who always pray for the earth and bless it. They range the realm of Vishnuloka," said Suka, the brilliant one.

VISHNUPADA: DHRUVA AND THE SISHUMARA CHAKRA

THE SAGE SON OF VYASA CONTINUED, "THIRTEEN LAKHS OF YOJANAS above the Saptarishi is the most exalted portion of the world of Vishnu. Here Dhruva, the North Star, Uttanapada's blessed son, dwells. The stars over which Agni, Indra, Kashyapa Prajapati and Dharma Deva preside, reverently circle him, always keeping him to their right. He is the support of those that survive until the kalpa ends in the final pralaya, the great deluge. He alone shines forever; the rest of the stars, set in motion by Kaala, Time of incomprehensible swiftness, are yoked to the pivot that he is (as oxen that tread ears of corn are to the post at the heart of the threshing ground), with invisible ropes of different lengths.

Around his still centre, the others move until the kalpa ends, and the stars are drowned and put out. They too are jivas, spirits with karma that impels them, inexorably on their various motions and orbits. There are those, Sages of profound instinct and learning, who say that the complex, wonderful system of the galaxy is supported by mystical powers of Narayana, who has assumed the form of a Gangetic porpoise! The ineffable creature lies with Dhruva at the tip of its tail, and coiled downwards.

Just below Dhruva are the four stars Prajapati, Agni, Indra and Dharma. At the root of its tail are Dhata and Vidhata. The Saptarishi shine upon the Sishumara Porpoise's hip. Upon its right flank, are fourteen constellations, from Abhijit to Punarvasu, which mark uttarayana, the northern journey of the Sun. Upon its left side, are the fourteen constellations from Pushyami to Uttarashada, which mark dakshinayana: the southern course. Upon the back of the dolphin is the Ajavathi: Mula, Purvashada and Uttarashada. Akasaganga, the Milky Way, forms the belly of the Dolphin.

Punarvasu and Pushyami are the Dolphin's right and left hips, Ardra and Aslesha its flippers, Abhijit and Uttarshada its nostrils, Sravana and Purvashada its eyes, Dhanishta and Mula its ears. The eight constellations that begin with Magha and mark the southern course of the Sun are the ribs of the Dolphin's left side, while the eight from Margasirsa to Purvabhadrapada on the right mark the uttarayana. Jyeshta and Satabhisha are located on the shoulders of the Sisumara.

The star Agasti shines upon the Dolphin's upper snout and Yama on the lower. Mars glows on its mouth, Saturn on its generative organ, Jupiter on its hump, the Sun blazes upon its chest; Narayana is its heart and Soma its mind. Venus is its navel, the Aswini Kumara twins its nipples, Budha its breath, Rahu its throat, Ketu everywhere as a shadow, and the other stars are the down on the great and mystic Sisumara's body. The wisest say that this is Vishnu himself, embodying all the Devas. They observe it every evening, as the Sun sets, and worship it: *We bow to the Purusha, Devadeva, Lord of Gods, who has assumed the form of the wheel of time, the support of galaxies; upon Him we meditate!*

A vision of the Sisumara and worshipping it thus, during the three sandhyas of the day, washes every sin of lives past, present and the future!" Suka Deva said.

Parikshit now asked, "Muni, tell me about Rahu and the patalas."

Suka resumed, "The knowing say that ten thousand yojanas below the Sun, Rahu orbits as a lunar mansion does. He is an Asura, a demon, but the Lord Vishnu's grace bestowed planethood upon him. But we shall speak of that later, when we describe the churning of the kshairasagara for the amrita. However, Rahu harbours an endless grudge against Surya and Soma Deva, because they exposed him to the Mohini, when he was on the verge of becoming immortal. He attacks them, invariably, on the days of purnima and amavasya, the full and new moons. And Vishnu protects the luminaries with his Sudarshana chakra on those days. At times, Rahu stands glowering at the blazing chakra for a muhurta, in frustration, his shadow long, his maw yawned wide to swallow Surya and Soma. These are the times of the eclipses of the Sun and the Moon.

Ten thousand yojanas below Rahu's realm lie the worlds of the siddhas, the charanas and the vidyadharas, the artists of heaven. Below these, the yakshas, rakshasas, pisachas, pretas and other ghouls, demons and goblins dwell. This region extends down to the zone of the wind and the clouds. Below these is the precinct of the birds of the air. We have seen, O King, the continents of the earth; below the earth's surface lie the worlds of nether: the patalas. There are seven under-worlds, each one ten thousand yojanas away from the next. They are equal in extent, and called Atala, Vitala, Sutala, Talatala, Mahatala, Rasatala and Patala.

Darkling they may be, but they are heavenly in their beauty and in the pleasures to be found in them. Daityas, Danavas and Nagas, the sons of Kadru, live in the magical patalas in magnificent mansions set amidst exotic gardens. These easily surpass those found in the swargas in the sheer variety and wonder of sensuous enjoyment available in them, in their wealth and their joy. The beings that live in these under-worlds are householders, grihastas living blissfully with their loving wives and children, enjoying every delight. They are masters of maya, and not even the Lord of the Devas can thwart a single desire of these Asuras.

The Demon architect, the awesome and blessed Mayaa, has built numerous cities in these subterranean worlds: incomparable puras that are not found anywhere else in creation. The gardens in which the demons' palaces are set are works of art, unequalled, created with ancient art known only to the race of Asuras. The trees and plants that grow here are indescribable, their fruit unlike any that exist even in Devaloka. The lakes and pools, the streams and rivers of Patala are peerless, too, as are the lotuses that float on their lucid water, and the brilliant and sweet-throated birds that sing in the branches of the lustrous trees. Rainbow, golden and silvery fish swim in the crystal waters.

There is no day or night in the under-worlds, only a perennial twilight. But no straggle of darkness dims the patalas, for the scintillating light that shines forth like small suns and moons from the hoods of the majestic Nagas that live here. No fear or anxiety exists in these magic worlds, for their denizens partake freely of magical substances — herbs, saps, elixirs — and bathe in magical rivers, lakes, pools and springs, hot and cold. They are immune to the passing years; no age touches their bodies or faces; grey hair and wrinkles do not mar their beauty. No paleness of complexion affects them, no bodily odour, tiredness, perspiration, be they young or aged. They have no fear of death, except from the Lord Vishnu's chakra. Only when the burning Sudarshana flies down into the patalas, the Asura women miscarry or abort their foetuses, in plain terror.

In the first and highest patala, called Atala, Mayaa's son Bali rules. The Sages know that Bali created the ninety-six different varieties of maya: the arcane sorceries. When he yawned, it is told, three sorts of women sprang from his mouth: svairinis, who sleep with men of their own caste; kaminis, who fornicate with men from outside their caste, and the pumschalis, who are the most promiscuous kind of kaminis. If a man wanders into Atala, by chance, these women give him a secret drink called hatakarasa, which makes him phenomenally virile. They copulate with him at will, ceaselessly, and drain him of all his vitality. He feels strong as a God for a night, potent as a thousand elephants; he feels that he owns the mystical powers of the greatest Rishis. He goes about as one gone mad with power, in unrestrained abandon. But in a short night, not just these exceptional powers fade, but he himself becomes a wraith, for he has expended the vitality of a lifetime in a few hours with the lascivious kaminis. They vampirise his very years, and leave him a shade, less than a walking corpse. He pays for his night of ecstasy with his life. The rest of his days he spends in memory of the few hours that robbed him of everything.

Directly beneath Atala is Vitala, where the Lord Siva dwells, with his pramathas, his goblin legions. He is called Hatakeswara and Bhava, the progenitor. As Bhava he is always locked in intimate embrace, communion, with Bhavani, the Goddess Parvati. From their sacred, unending coition, the creation of the Prajapatis is made fruitful, and it multiplies. From Siva the great river Hataki flows, imbued with both their prodigious energies. Kindled by Vayu, Agni drinks from that river. What he spits out is the recondite gold called haataka. Men and women in the kingdoms and courts of the Asuras of Patala wear the precious metal as ornaments.

Below Vitala is Sutala, where Virocahana's son Bali is monarch: he who was once a perfect sovereign of the earth, who has immortal fame and renown. It was Vishnu, as the Dwarf Vamana, who deprived Bali of lordship over the three realms. Vishnu did this to oblige Indra, but the wealth and power of Bali in Sutala far exceed Indra's in Devaloka. Bali unfailingly worships the Lord Narayana, who delivered him to eternal kingdom by thrusting him down into the under-world that he now rules, by setting his foot on the great Demon's head. The Rishis consider the Asura Mahabali a jivanmukta, a liberated soul, who has attained moksha by the Lord's grace. Why, those that know say that if a man but utters the Lord's precious name while sneezing or falling, and especially as he dies, all his bonds of karma are instantly severed, and he attains nirvana.

Most significant, most marvellous: the Lord Mahavishnu himself stands at the utterly pure Mahabali's door in Sutala, as his dwarapalaka! Legend has it that when ten-headed Ravana once arrived at Bali's gates to conquer him, Vishnu flicked his toe at the Rakshasa of Lanka, and he was flung away a distance of ten crores of yojanas.

Below Sutala, in Talatala, Mayaa, king of the Danavas, lord of the Tripura lives. It is the Lord Siva, who burnt the Tripura with his astra, who has installed Mayaa as Emperor of Talatala. Siva protects his greatest bhakta, the Asura, in every way. Mayaa is a master of sorcery and magic. He is free from the terror of the Sudarshana Chakra, and all the denizens of the patalas honour him for this.

Below Mayaa's domain is Mahatala. Here the broods of many-headed ferocious serpents called Krodhavasas, dwell. Chief among them are Kuhaka, Takshaka, Kaliya and Sushena. They are immense, unimaginable, in coil upon coil. Great are their powers and great is their wisdom. But they live in dread of golden Garuda, Vishnu's mount, who hunts them if he ever finds them upon the surface worlds. They live with their many wives and children in considerable joy.

Below Mahatala, in Rasatala, live the progeny of Kashyapa Prajapati's wives Diti and Danu; the Asuras known as the Panis, also known as the Kaalakeyas, and the Nivatakavchas who dwell in the legendary golden city Hiranyapuri, which flies through the air at their will! They live here in fear of the chakra of Narayana, as well as of Indra. Once, these Panis stole Indra's cows and hid them under the sea. Indra sent his witch-dog Sarama to discover his gentle animals and she sniffed them out. The Panis tried to win her over to their side, with promises of gifts and favours, but she cursed them: *Hata Indrena Panayah Sayadhvam*, meaning *Panis, lie dead slain by Indra!*

The lowest of the under-worlds is Patala. Here, great Vasuki rules, lord of the Nagas. With him as their emperor, rule others of his clan: Sankha, Kulika, Mahasankha, Sweta the white, Dhananjaya of untold wealth, Dhritarashtra, Shankhachuda, Kambala, Asvatara. They wear incredible jewels in their countless hoods, and the light from these dispels the natural darkness of their realm.

Then, there is the realm thirty thousand yojanas below Patala. Here, an amsa of the Lord dwells, an embodiment of pure tamas. He is Samkarshana, the Adi Sesha, the original Serpent Antana, infinite, upon whom Narayana rests on the waters of eternity. He is an embodiment of the ego, the sense of 'I-ness'; he unites the seer and the seen, mystically.

The Lord, as Ananatasesha, supports Swarga, Bhumi and Patala, which we have just described, on one of his thousand heads. They seem minute as a mustard seed upon a planet! When he knows the time of the End has come, the time to destroy the world, his thousand brows knit in wrath. From between them Rudra the Destroyer springs, ablaze; then again, and again: in all twelve Annihilators, each three-eyed, carrying apocalyptic tridents.

All the great Nagas worship their Lord Ananta, and how radiant they are when they do. Virgin Naga princesses anoint his arms that are like silver pillars, and indeed all his brilliant body, with unguents of aguru, sandalwood and saffron. Desire agitates their minds as they do this, and they are full of blushes and seductive smiles, for Kama Deva subtly enters their hearts. They gaze at him, quivering, and he favours them with a glance from his reddish eyes, which make him seem drunk, and with a smile full of mercy: he, the primeval Ananta. He keeps his wrath firmly restrained and nurtures the worlds with that awesome energy.

The hosts of Devas, Asuras, nagas, siddhas, gandharvas, vidyadharas and Rishis meditate upon his splendour. He is plunged always in ecstasy and his red eyes roll truly like a drunk's, from this bliss. His weapon is the halayadha, an occult ploughshare, upon which he rests a languid hand. His sweet speech is amrita to his followers who stand entranced hearing his voice. He wears bright blue silk and a single earring. As Airavata does his golden girth, Ananta wears a vanamala called Vaijayanti, woven from tulasi shoots, and kunda, mandara, parijata and kalahara blooms. Intoxicated bees hum around the unfading thing.

When meditated upon, Samkarsahana enters the hearts of those that seek moksha. He severs the umbilical knots of avidya, dark ignorance, and lets in the light of eternal bliss, nirvana: thus Brahma's sage son Narada sang, and the master gandharva minstrel Tumburu accompanied him, in Brahma's sabha. They sang that Anantasesha is Brahma himself, a manifestation of the Creator. They sang that no one can enumerate the mighty deeds of the Lord Sesha, upon one of whose heads the Earth rests like an atom! Numberless, limitless, are his powers and achievements; cosmic they are! Those that worship him surely tread the path towards moksha."

THE NARAKAS

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "I HAVE HEARD THERE ARE A GREAT MANY REGIONS that souls of the earth attain after they die. Is this true, my lord?"

Suka said, "There are, O Kshatriya, as many hells as there are heavens, and those that sin surely do find these narakas for themselves, until they are purified and rise to the higher realms again. The hells, like all conditions, are states of mind too, resulting from ignorance, avidya, and from violence."

Parikshit wanted to know, "Where are these hells situated?"

"They are deep inside the three worlds, in the southern direction, below the earth and above the waters. Here, the manes called the Agnisvattas dwell. They worship the great Gods with deep bhakti and ask them to bless their descendants. Here, too, Surya Deva's son, Yama, the Lord Death, dwells with his retinue. And those souls that his dutas bring to him, he punishes according to their crimes, their punishment being exact, never more or less than the sinner deserves.

Some Munis have said there are twenty-one narakas, each to expiate a different kind of sin. Their names are Tamisra, Andhatamisra, Raurava, Maharaurava, Kumbhipaka, Kalasutra, Asipatravana, Sukaramukha, Andhakupa, Kirimibhojana, Sandamsa, Taptasurmi, Vajrakantakasalmali, Vaitarani, Puyoda, Pranarodha, Visasana, Lalabhaksha, Sarameyadana, Avichi and Ayapana.

Some Sages name seven more than these: Ksharakardama, Rakshoganabhojana, Sulaprota, Dandasuka, Avatanirodhana, Paryavartana and Suchimukha. These, they say, are the twenty-eight infernal regions where souls are tormented for their sins.

A man who takes another's wealth, children or wife is bound in mortal cords by dreadful Yamadutas and cast into the hell called Tamisra. Here he is tormented in pitch blackness: starved and deprived of water, beaten savagely with cudgels, threatened by fell voices from the perpetual night, until he loses consciousness.

He that deceives another man, and enjoys his wife or his property, is cast into Andhatamisra, a worse hell still. Here he is blinded by the tortures inflicted upon him, hence the name of this hell.

He that identifies himself as his body, who lives as if he owns his wife, children, his property and wealth, who particularly feeds and enriches his own family by cheating and being malicious towards others, finds the hell called Raurava when he dies. Here the creatures he has tortured and killed on earth are born as Rurus, the most savage and vicious beings, which now torment him unspeakably, by Yama's dictates, until he has paid for his every sin.

Maharaurava is an extreme form of Raurava. It is for sinners that have nourished themselves at the expense of others. Here the Rurus are the Kravyadas, and they are carnivores that devour the sinner repeatedly, while he comes to life again and again.

In Kumbhipkia, Yama's servitors fry the souls that have been carnivores themselves on earth in boiling oil.

The man or woman that harbours malice towards their parents finds the hell called Kaalasutra. This is a sheet of copper ten thousand yojanas square. Great fires heat it from below, and the blazing sun from above. Thousands of years the sinner spends being roasted upon this infernal plate.

Heretics that renounce the sanatana dharma and embrace false doctrines on earth and promulgate these, seducing the innocent into their heresies, the Yamadutas cast into Asipatravana. This is a forest, whose trees have sword-like leaves. Yama's fierce servitors chase him with many thonged whips that lash his skin like fire. As he flees from them, the sword leaves cut his body into shreds, repeatedly: each time it is restored for further punishment.

A king, his ministers or other officers that inflict undeserved punishment on the innocent, during their lives, find the naraka called Sukaramukha. Here their limbs are crushed by invisible engines, like sugarcane is in a press. The body mends after each crushing and is crushed again. The sinner's cries, in all these hells, ring out piteously.

Those that torment or kill creatures that cannot retaliate on earth fall into Andhakupa, where it is perfectly dark. In that blackness, he is tortured and devoured by the dumb creatures to which he once caused pain.

He that eats without performing the five daily sacrifices, or sharing the food with his guests, elders, wife and children, is called a crow. When he dies, he goes to the hell called Kirimibhjana. He finds himself a worm in this naraka, among numberless other worms in a stagnant pool a lakh of yojanas wide. The worms around him prey on him, as he does upon them, endlessly, until his sins are consumed.

In the Naraka Sandamsa, sinners pay for sins of thieving, without sufficient cause. Yamadutas torture him with red-hot iron balls, tongs and staffs. They peel his skin off again and again.

In Taptasurmi, adulterers and fornicators are punished by having to embrace burning images of the lovers with whom they should never have copulated. Copulators that indulged themselves with animals find the hell called Vajrakantakasalmali, which is a great silk cotton tree, with thorns of adamant. Repeatedly, they are dragged violently across those thorns that tear them in slivers.

Kshatriyas, the king's ministers and others noble born, who transgress dharma during their lives, find themselves in the dreadful river Vaitarani when they die. The river, which flows pus, urine, bile, excrement, phlegm, blood, fat, marrow and every kind of filth, forms a moat around the Narakas, and is full of the most vicious aquatic creatures. The sinners feed on the filth of the Vaitarani, for they have no other food, while the savage fish feed on them. They, too, are devoured and recreated countless times, before they are purified and escape the river of retribution.

The next hell, Puyoda, is a sea similar to the Vaitarani, except that only sinful brahmanas go to this hell. Brahmanas who become hunters and eaters of flesh during their lives are cast into the naraka called Prananirodha, where Yamakinkaras hunt them with arrows like beasts. Those that sacrifice animals at false yagnas find the hell Vaisasa, where the servants of Yama slice their flesh in slivers, again and again. The lustful brahmana that makes his own wife drink his semen finds himself in the Lalabhaksha naraka, which is a stream of semen, and he drinks this and nothing else until he is chastened.

In the hell called Sarameyadana, Yamakinkaras appear as vicious hounds with adamantine fangs to rend those that were dacoits, arsonists and poisoners on earth.

In the fathomless Naraka Avichimat, liars are hauled to the top of a precipice and cast down into what seems like clear water but is in fact smooth rock. They burst asunder into pieces, but immediately become whole again, and are dragged off to the cliff yet again, and flung down once more.

Winebibbers find the hell called Ayahpana, where Yama's servants pour molten iron into their mouths, endlessly.

Those that disrespect their caste superiors, their masters, are hurled headfirst into the deep Naraka called Ksharakardama, where also they experience untold torments.

In the hell Rakshoganabhojana, human beings sacrificed to dark gods turn into legions of demons and torture their former sacrificers. They carve their flesh and bones with axes and knives, as butchers do meat on their boards, drink their blood, devour them repeatedly, all the while singing delightedly to hear the screams of their victims.

Confidence tricksters of the violent sort, find themselves cast into Sulaprota, where they are impaled on stakes just as they did their unsuspecting victims once. Strange and bloodthirsty birds, kankas and vatakas, savage them with beak and claw to remind them of their own sins.

Cruel souls fall into the Naraka Dandasuka, where seven-headed serpents gobble them like mice. Men who once incarcerated others in dark dungeons fall into the black hell Avataniradhana, where they are choked by noxious fumes and fires.

He that once glowered threateningly at all he saw, now finds himself in Kanavata, where crows, kites and vultures peck out his eyes over and over again.

He that hoarded his wealth and watched over it like a goblin now turns into one in the hell Suchimukha. Like punitive tailors, Yama's kinkaras sew his skin with needles from every side.

O Kshatriya, these are in fact just a few of the hells to be found in Yama's domain. I have heard there are thousands of them, each with its own tortures, where the Lord Death's servitors mete out terrible justice to those that break dharma, until they are purified and born again as men.

Those that follow dharma, find sweet swargas of myriad joys. They remain in those heavens until their punya is exhausted and then they are born as men and women again, with some karma still attached to them. Again, they tread the eternal path towards moksha: finding which, they never return to joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, birth or death, but are forever free.

This Brahmanda, the egg-formed universe, is just the grossest body of the splendorous Narayana. It is made of his maya, and comprises the three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas. Those that look beyond the appearances of this sthula rupa find bhakti and the Lord's grace and are liberated from the material universe. The bhakta who understands the Purana, O King, seeks the subtle Form of the God Vishnu, the Deliverer. He that seeks does certainly find, however long the journey, and then he never returns to the places of grossness or darkness.

But now you have heard about the Lord's sthula rupa, in which all the substantial worlds and their creature dwell," said Suka, the enlightened, to Yudhishtira's grandson, the Pandava king Parikshit.

Skandha 6

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THE STORY OF AJAMILA

PARIKSHIT SAID, "BLESSED SUKA DEVA, YOU HAVE DESCRIBED NIVRITTI, the path by which all karma ceases and a man is united with Brahman. You have described pravritti also, the path of worldly deeds, by which a man attains to heavens of the Devas. You have told me about the Narakas, and the Manvantara of Svayambhuva Manu, the first Manu. You have dwelt upon the dynasty of Priyavrata and Uttanapada, the divisions of the earth, the heavens and the under-worlds, as the Lord has created them. I am unnerved hearing about the dreadful hells. Tell me, Muni, how a man might avoid falling into them. For the flesh is weak, and it is hard for even the sagest and best of men to remain pure."

Suka murmured, "If a sinner does not expiate his sins while he is still alive upon the earth, he certainly finds a Naraka for himself. As you observe, all men sin, despite themselves. Especially in the kali yuga."

The king said, "Truly, though they know the consequences of what they do, men do sin, for the senses are powerful and men lose control of them. Why, they sin, then repent; but then, my lord, they sin again: as meaninglessly as the elephant that washes itself in the river and then immediately smears itself with mud."

Suka said, "Truly, a man may atone for a particular sin, but that does not release him from avidya, the condition of ignorance that makes him sin. Hence, he sins again. The only final expiation is gyana, the truth that sets a man free from the very desire to sin. At last, only the Lord Vishnu liberates his bhaktas from birth, death, sin, and sorrow. Only the man who surrenders to Krishna finds nirvana, the ultimate peace. Especially in this darkness of the kali yuga, O Kshatriya, bhakti for Krishna alone can set a man free. Not by the greatest sacrifice or penance, not by the most stringent abstinence does a man find moksha, but by bhakti, and surrendering his life, whatever it is, to the One who knows how to free jivas: the Lord Narayana. Why, O King, it is said that a moment of surrender to Krishna surpasses lifetimes of tapasya, which, indeed, only lead to such a moment. Would you hear the tale of the Brahmana Ajamila, who had fallen into committing the vilest sins?"

"I surely would, Swami. You know that your Purana is like amrita to me."

"Once, in the city of Kanyakubja, there lived this brahmana called Ajamila. He was smitten by a low-born servant-maid, abandoned his own family and began living with her in sin. Using his natural intelligence in the most perverted manner, he became a gambler, a cheat, a perpetrator of fraud and a kidnapper. Thus, he maintained his daasi woman and her brood of ten children that he begot on her, for eighty-eight years. Of course, he entirely renounced the dharma of his birth, the pious, spiritual life of a brahmana.

Of the ten sons he had by the servant woman, in his dotage he grew particularly attached to the youngest one: a handsome little fellow that his father named Narayana. He would spend hours watching this boy at play, listening to his lisping nonsense, his sweet voice. Ajamila would not eat unless little Narayana sat with him and he fed him with his own hands. His putrasneha bordered on madness;. and he hardly realised that his time had come when death arrived in the form of three horrible Yamadutas who dragged him away to hell. At that last instant, too, Ajamila only thought of his little son, and cried out for him, in absolute terror and despair: 'Oh Narayana, come to me!'

Instantly, four of Vishnu's siddhas appeared there, and prevented the deadly servants of Yama from dragging Ajamila's jiva out from the recess of his heart. The Yamadutas cried in some surprise, 'Who are you, lords? Why do you stop us from taking this soul to our master Yama, sovereign of dharma? Ah, surely, you are all radiant and handsome, four-armed, with eyes long as lotus petals. But why prevent us from performing our dharma?'

Vishnu's messengers laughed heartily, and their leader replied in a voice reverberant as thunder, 'If you truly serve the Lord of dharma, tell us how true dharma can be distinguished from false dharma. Tell us about sin and punishment.'

The leader of the Yamadutas said, 'Dharma is what is written in the Veda. What goes against the Veda is adharma. We have heard that the Veda is Vishnu incarnate, that it is his prana, and is svayambhuva, having come into being by itself. Narayana supports the Veda and all the living within his own person.

Surya, Agni, Akasa, Vayu, Soma, the sandhyas, the days and nights, the gentle cows of the earth, the Cardinal Points, the Gods of Water, Earth, Time and the Lord Dharma himself are the witnesses of the karma of embodied beings. The sins that these witnesses have seen are the reasons for punishment. All karma, Divine ones, is because of rajas and tamas, and none of the embodied desists from action. Karma and its fruit are exactly balanced: as the jivas sow in the field of karma, they reap, either in this same life or the next. No karma, however insignificant, is lost, not in a thousand kalpas. The births themselves, the proportion of sattva, rajas and tamas they contain, are decided by karma of the past: veiled, diverse, mysterious and inexorable.

Our Lord Yama Dharma remains in his city, Samyamini, and clearly sees the previous lives and forms of every jiva. He reflects deeply, with fathomless intelligence and sensibility what each jiva's future should be, based on what he sees. The jiva is like a sleeper, identifying himself only with the body in which he finds himself, just as the dreamer does with his dream form until he awakens. The linga sarira, the spirit body, has no beginning. It binds the jiva in samsara, compels him to experience the fruit of his karma. The jiva who has not subdued his senses and his mind entangles himself helplessly, deeper in the bonds of karma: rather as a silkworm does in its own cocoon. He does not see what he truly is.

No being is actless, not for a moment, for the deluded mind helplessly carries out its own karma. The Atman's natural condition is pure bliss. With a brief time of bhakti, the deluded soul returns to this pristine condition; he is freed from all his karma. But he that has no worship, no devotion for God, devolves into the deepest darkness; he becomes a beast, a demon, as this once noble brahmana has.'

The angels of Vishnu said, 'So Ajamila was a good brahmana once?'

The Yamakinkaras replied, 'Indeed he was. Why, he was the epitome of everything a good brahmana should be. He was gentle, good-natured to a fault, and virtuous. He kept his holy vratas, he always spoke the truth, was restrained, soft-spoken, and a master of the occult and mystical mantras and yantras, pure in thought, word and deed.

Ah, he was an exemplary brahmana, who served his gurus faultlessly, worshipped the holy agni, cared lovingly for his guests and elders. He was humble, free from envy, compassionate to all the living, a man of few words; why, my lords, he was a true Muni, a Sage, a saint! This was when he was a young man, living with his youthful brahmana wife in his father's home. One day, his father sent Ajamila to the forest to gather some fruit, flowers, dry branches for his worship and kusa grass. Ajamila set out before noon, and soon the serene young man had collected everything that his father asked for, and was returning home.

As he made his way through a stand of punnaga trees, he heard some extraordinary noises that came from a glade that lay ahead of him. He paused behind the last tree, and saw a sight that would change his life. He saw a dark, drunken sudra with a daasi woman, a prostitute. Both were intoxicated, and the sudra had just loosened the dusky whore's blouse and cloth and had his hands upon her breasts, while he kissed her lips and her neck lasciviously. Ajamila stood rooted by what he saw: that scene of lust. He saw the daasi's black skin painted with unguents pressed from flowers, as the sudra pulled away the last yard of her cloth. She was naked now. The man bared himself, and laying her on the grass, knelt between her legs, and began to make febrile love to her. Her moans and soon her cries echoed through the forest. Ajamila watched transfixed, and he was lost: he wanted that woman as he had never wanted anything in his life.

Ajamila wandered back home in a daze. From that day, he spent all his time secretly wooing the daasi woman. She realised quickly that he was a golden opportunity to improve her lot. She gave cunningly and carefully of her favours, making sure he fell deeper and deeper into her clutches. Ajamila neglected all his brahmana dharma, so besotted was he by the embraces of the daasi. Abandoning his wife and his parents, he went to live with the whore. He squandered all his gold, pandering to her least whim. He exhausted his entire inheritance, selling his ancestral home and lands to provide her with vulgar ornaments and gaudy silks.

When all he had from his father was gone, he embarked on a career of gambling and, later, of thievery. Eighty years passed, and there was no sin he did not commit for the daasi's sake. He sired ten sons on her, O brilliant ones, while his own wife lived and died miserably. Tell us, masters, why we should spare this sinner's soul, and not drag it down into naraka for him to pay for everything he has done?'

Vishnu's siddhas said to the Yamakinkaras, 'There is just one reason, O Yamadutas: in his final moment of life, with his last breath, the fallen brahmana called out to the Lord. *Narayana, come to me*, was what he cried. Messengers of Death, those four syllables, spoken so fervently, are enough to free not just Ajamila but the very earth of all its sins! That name he called is the ultimate sanctuary of the living, indeed, of the vilest sinner. The mercy in that name shall suffice to wash all the kalpas of their burdens of sin. With what he said, Ajamila purified himself completely; no sin clings to him anymore.

Mercy and love, O messengers of Dharma, are the very heart of creation. What meaning does existence have if it is not founded upon the Lord's eternal mercy and love? And calling any of the Lord's names is the highest penance, the final expiation for a sinner: let him be a thief, a traitor to his friend, a murderer of a woman or a brahmana, an adulterer with his Guru's wife, a regicide, or whatever. No tapasya, no yagna purifies a criminal's heart like uttering the Lord's name fervently. Unlike other penances, this one's effects last long after the *naama japa,* the actual utterance.

Kinkaras, even the inadvertent utterance of any of God's names purifies a jiva incalculably: it has saved this Ajamila. Sins are consumed by *naama japa,* but it is true that only a vision of God eradicates the very vasanas from a man's mind, the primal urges to sin. Thus, a man should live with care and tread the path of bhakti. Along this path to moksha, saying the names of God is like the most potent herb for a sick man: even if taken without knowing what it truly is, it cures!'

Then, seeing the Yamadutas still hesitate, the messengers of Vishnu said, 'Obviously, you doubt what we say; go and ask your master Yama if we spoke the truth or lied.'

Thus, Vishnu's siddhas delivered Ajamila the sinful brahmana from Death's clutches. Yama's messengers flew back to their master, and reported whatever had happened. They said, bewildered, 'How many rulers are there of these worlds of creatures? How many dispensers of justice? We always thought you were the final judge, the only one who punished. We always thought you were the highest authority, judge of even the Devas. But today our faith has been shaken to its roots. We went to fetch the soul of the sinner Ajamila to your hellfire, but four wondrous siddhas prevented us. They used no force, but spoke sweetly. Yet they were radiant, and their power far exceeded ours, which is, Lord Yama, your power. They severed the knots with which we had bound his spirit, easily, and set him free. All because, just as he was dying, he called the name Narayana.'

Contrary to their expectations, Yama smiled broadly. They saw his eyes light up with some great joy. In fact, at that moment, the Lord Death communed with Vishnu, God of Gods, and sweet ecstasy filled his heart. He said gently to his kinkaras, 'Ah, my friends, I am not the One that creates and rules the universe. I am only one of his servants, as you are mine. As I am yours, he is my king, and the sovereign of all the worlds. Time, galaxies and souls are woven into him like threads into an infinite cloth. From him creation, sustenance and destruction emanate. He controls the ages, the epochs, immaculately. Every blade of grass, each grain of sand, every great star and every living being belong to him, and exist because of him. He knows them all.

Few are those in the universe untouched by rajas and tamas, who are ruled entirely by the sattva guna. The Lords Brahma and Siva are among these; I am one such, as are Indra, Nirriti, Varuna, Soma, Agni, Surya, Vayu. The twelve Adityas are sattvik, so are the Viswedevas, the eight Vasus, the Sadhyas, the forty-nine Maruts, the eleven Rudras, the angelic Siddhas, the progenitors of the galaxies, Marichi, Kashyapa and the others, Gurudeva, Bhrigu. Yet all these are also blinded by his maya, and cannot fathom his intentions. What then of the rest?

The Lord transcends us all. No jiva can comprehend him, or even imagine him, remotely; though he dwells in their very hearts, and rules their lives, every breath they draw. As for the four siddhas you saw. These wonderful messengers of Vishnu range his worlds. They all resemble him in appearance and in radiance. The Devas worship them as amsas of the Lord. Often, they go disguised and protect the bhaktas of Narayana from enemies, why, even from me, Yama, and my dutas and kinkaras.

Not the greatest Siddhas, Maharishis and Devas understand the essence of the hermetic sanatana dharma, which Narayana has propounded. There are just twelve among all the created that have fathomed the eternal dharma, by the Lord's grace: Siva, Brahma, Narada, Sanatkumara, Kapila Deva, Manu, Prahlada, Janaka, Bheeshma, Mahabali, Vyasa's son Suka, and I, Yamadharma. All of us that have understood the purest dharma, the heart of knowledge, have found moksha for ourselves. The highest dharma is bhakti and bhakti alone, and the greatest bhakti is enshrined in the name of the Lord Narayana.

You witnessed a small miracle of naamabhasha, the power of the Lord's name. Ajamila did not chant *Narayana* with any conscious devotion. He merely cried out to his son in his final pang of despair. The Lord's name saved his soul from us, and the torments we had in store for him.

So, my dutas, I say to you, never even go near men that have resorted to Hari Narayana, or said his name even once: for they are protected ones: Vishnu's infinite grace is upon them, his mace Kaumodaki protects them.

Not the Kaalatman, not we, shall punish such men, be they the greatest sinners.'

The Lord Yama drew a deep breath and whispered, 'Lord, forgive me that my kinkaras went to capture Ajamila's spirit. I ask your forgiveness, Krishna, for them and for myself. Never again shall they err in this manner. Lord, always grant me the bliss of bhakti, for there is nothing to compare with it anywhere in creation or in time.'

O Parikshit, it was the awesome Agastya Muni who once told me this sacred tale, upon the summit of the Malaya mountain, where he sat in tapasya, chanting the holy names of Krishna," said Suka.

Parikshit wanted to know, "And what happened to the brahmana Ajamila, my lord?"

"Ajamila had heard the dharma as told by both the Yamadutas and the Siddhas of Vishnu. When the Lord Death's kinkaras vanished, he stopped trembling and gazed at the angels of Narayana in wonder and awe, in great relief. He opened his mouth to ask them something, but they vanished before his eyes, as if they had said all that he needed to hear. As he stood alone, a tide of revulsion for his life swept over that brahmana. He saw everything he had done, all his sins, flash before his eyes, and untold repugnance filled his heart. He wondered if the experience of almost dying and being miraculously saved had been a hallucination. He wondered who the fierce kinkaras had been, and who the four divine beings that had saved him from them. He trembled again, and then, without a backward glance at his home, his woman or children, he walked out of his dwelling and headed for Gangadvara. As he went, he felt a great freedom dawning over his spirit; he felt the shackles of darkness falling away from him.

Arriving in the holy tirtha, where Narayana surely dwells, Ajamila sat down under a nyagrodha tree and began to meditate upon the Lord, chanting Narayana's name in his heart. After some years of this constant chanting, he imagined the Vishnudutas, the four Siddhas, standing before him, and lo, there they were! He bowed deeply to them. They laid their palms on his head in blessing and that brahmana cast away his body, and rose from it. Now he also had the splendid form of a Siddha of Vishnu.

A golden vimana appeared, and Ajamila, the Siddha, rose in it into Vishnuloka, along with the other four angels."

Suka Deva paused, then concluded musingly, "So, in fact, O King, the seed of his salvation was that single utterance of the Lord's name, when he called out to his small son at the moment before he almost died. Mystical and unfathomable are the sacred names of Narayana. Not the greatest ones in the universe have plumbed their meaning and power."

THE DESCENDANTS OF DAKSHA

PARIKSHIT SAID, "YOU HAVE DESCRIBED THE GENESIS OF THE DEVAS, the Asuras, men, nagas, beasts and birds during the first manvantara of Svayambhuva Manu. Tell me more about how creation grew and how its races and species spread."

Vyasa's son, the enlightened Suka, said, "When Prachinabarhis' sons, the ten Prachetases, emerged from the sea, they saw the earth covered by trees. In rage, they blew fire and wind from their mouths to consume the trees. Seeing this, Soma Deva, god of plants, said to them, 'O Kshatriyas, what are you doing? You are meant to protect these mute beings. Hari created them to feed the beings that move: the trees to bear fruit and the cereal plants to bear grain. Your father bade you further creation; you must not burn down the trees that will help do just that.

If you would worship the Lord Hari, as your sires did, you must nurture the creation in which he dwells. Spare the trees that remain; live among them blissfully. Look here, at what the trees have for you!'

Soma pointed his finger at the trees and an exquisite young woman stepped out from among them; she was their foundling. The Moon God had fed her with amrita from his finger. She was luminous, and she was beautiful past telling. The Prachetases stood enchanted by her; they ceased burning the trees of the earth. The Prachetases married that girl, who was called Marisha. They sired Daksha upon her, and all the worlds are peopled by their descendants and Daksha's.

In the beginning, Daksha created the Devas, the Asuras, men, gandharvas and the others that dwell on earth, in the water and the sky. He created them just by his thought. But he soon found that his creation was inert, and did not multiply or grow. Daksha went to the foothills of the Vindhya Mountain and sat in tapasya. He sat on the banks of the most sacred lake Aghamashana, whose waters quell all sins. He bathed thrice each day in that lake, during the three sandhyas, at dawn, noon and dusk. He worshipped Hari with an unflickering mind, and the secret Hamsaguhya mantra.

One day, as Daksha stood in the lake, singing the esoteric hymn, the Lord appeared before him. He came riding on golden, brilliant Garuda. He was effulgent, the Lord Vishnu, wore a pitambara silk robe, a wildflower vanamala, carried his shell, his disk, his sword, shield, bow, an arrow, a noose and a mace in his hands. He was dark as a raincloud, bright as a sun. The Srivatsa and the Kaustubha adorned his beautiful chest. He wore unearthly ornaments, twinkling like galaxies. Narada, Nanda and the Lokapalas came with him. The siddhas, gandharvas, vidyadharas and charanas sang his praises.

Seeing that Vision, Daksha was overwhelmed and prostrated, his body as stiff as a rod, before Mahavishnu. As rivers in flood break their banks, Daksha's senses were flooded by ecstasy. The Prajapati was speechless for joy. He lay there, not saying a word.

The Lord said to him, 'Daksha, I am pleased with your tapasya and its purpose. Here is Asikni, daughter of Panchajana, lord of the six tribes. Take her to be your wife and beget the races of creation upon her with joyful coition. From now, all created beings shall be conceived by sexual union between male and female. And they shall offer worship.'

His hand raised in a blessing, Narayana vanished before Daksha's eyes, like a dream.

With that blessing Daksha begot upon Asikni, also called Panchajani, ten thousand sons and they were called the Haryasvas. They all looked alike and were righteous. Daksha told them to go forth and increase creation, to beget children themselves. They set out westwards, and came to the sacred lake called the Narayanasaras, where many siddhas and Rishis had sat in tapasya. The touch of those holy waters purified them, and they found themselves drawn irresistibly to the ancient path of the Paramahamsas, their ancestors. But remembering their father's dictate, they sat in tapasya on the shores of the Narayanasaras: to become creators themselves.

Daksha's brother, the Mahamuni Narada, saw them from the sky. He flew down to them and said, 'Children, how can you begin to dream of becoming creators without first seeing all the creation that already exists, the ends of the world? Surely, this is childish. You are meant to be the guardians of the earth, and here you are indulging yourselves while you should be abroad, learning. Have you ever seen the kingdom in which just one man lives; or the tunnel that has no end; or the woman who can assume any form she likes; the man that married a whore; the river that flows in both directions; the house made of twenty-five magical substances; the swan that tells magical stories, the spinning disk made of adamant and razors? No? Then are you certain you have properly understood your father's command, that you sit here in such a tapasya to become creators, without knowing what creation is?'

The Haryasvas were intrigued. They began to solve the riddles in which Narada spoke. They said, 'Truly, the linga sarira is what has existed almost since time began. The spirit body binds us in mortality, the world of samsara, of delusions. And without seeing the ends of the world, how can we become creators?'

'Yes, how can we engage in karma, which does not lead to moksha? Such karma can only be futile.'

'The solitary man that inhabits a kingdom is certainly the Paramatman. He is the Turiya, the fourth being, beyond viswa, taijasa and prajna. He is the First One, the cause of causes. Without seeing him, of what use can any karma be? Even if it is dedicated to him.'

'The tunnel without end is the path to the Brahman, treading which a soul never returns to this samsara.'

'The woman who can assume any form she chooses is the intellect, the mind bound by the gunas. Of what use can the karma of one who has not subdued this harlot be?'

'Maya, illusion, is the river that flows both ways: one as anger, greed, lust, egotism, the other as penance, learning, charity and grief. What use is any karma done under the influence of this river?'

'The house of the twenty-five substances is this life, and the substances are the qualities the samkhyas have enumerated.'

'It is also the swan that tells different stories: *kvachid hamsam chitrakatham*.'

'The chakra of adamant and razors is the wheel of time, turning relentlessly, all the worlds and jivas bound to it.'

'Truly, Muni, you have enlightened us. Our father never meant us to become creators, but only to understand the nature of these riddles of life, and to seek moksha, nothing else.'

The Haryasvas made a devout pradakshina around Narada, whom they now considered their Guru, and went their way – to tread the path to moksha, from which there is no return. Narada resumed his own journey through the world, his mind absorbed in the svarabrahman, the musical notes, which reveal the sacred feet of the Lord, the font of infinite bliss.

Daksha heard his noble and dharmic sons had abandoned their inherited karma, the task of furthering creation, and had disappeared on a journey of no return. He grieved over his loss, crying that even the best children could be a source of such pain. Brahma consoled his mind-born son, and set Daksha to his task again. The Prajapati now sired a thousand sons on his Panchajani Asikni, and they were called Sabalasvas.

Their father instructed them, as well, to go forth and multiply. They also came to the sacred Narayana lake, where their older brothers had found the final liberation and dissolution into the primordial elements. They, too, touched the holy water and were purified; and they sat down to a stern tapasya, chanting the primal syllable **AUM** ceaselessly. For months they ate nothing but imbibed only water; then for months more, they did not even drink but subsisted on just the air they breathed.

They invoked Vishnu: **AUM,** *we salute the Lord Narayana, the Antaryamin, the Paramatman, who is blemishless and manifests himself in the heart that is pure. Upon Him we meditate.*

As they sat absorbed, Narada arrived there, and spoke to the Sabalasvas exactly as he had done to the Haryasvas. 'Sons of Daksha, what are you doing? Don't you love your elder brothers who sat here before you? Aren't you eager to discover the secret and hallowed journey they undertook? Surely, a younger brother that follows his elder brother finds great punya for himself. Why, he enjoys swarga, with the Maruts, who love one another as they do themselves, for his friends.'

This is all that Muni said to his nephews, before vanishing. But he had sown a deep seed – the Sabalasvas also followed the way of the Haryasvas: they set out on the journey of no return, to discover the ends of the universe. They, also, trod the inward path that leads to nirvana. They never came back. This time, however, Daksha saw countless evil omens, and he knew who had sent all his sons upon their final quest. Narada sensed his brother's terrible grief; he realised his brother was on the verge of turning into a sannyasi himself. Narada went to Daksha, to stop him.

His lips quivering in fury, Daksha turned on Narada. 'Sinner! What have you done? Before their time, you set my innocent sons on the renunciate's path. You have ruined them, robbed them of happiness in both this world and the next: for they have not paid their debt to the Rishis, the Devas and the Pitrs. They have never lived in the world of karma, to know its fruit. You are a subverter of the minds of innocents. You bring shame to the name of Hari. What Muni are you, Narada, what avadhuta? How can anyone realise the futility of samsara without experiencing its joys and sorrows? You prevented my sons from becoming husbands and fathers. You kept them from furthering my race!'

Daksha paused, his eyes on fire, his breath shallow. Then he cried, 'I curse you, wretched Narada, despoiler of my clan. For the endless journey on which you sent my precious sons, I curse you to wander the worlds, forever homeless and restless yourself!'

Narada smiled, accepting the curse. He strummed on his vina, and murmured only, 'Very well, my brother,' though he could have cursed Daksha back. But then, unlike his brother, Narada was a true sadhu and avadhuta. He was past attachment of any sort, save to his Lord Narayana.

His father Brahma consoled Daksha for his loss, and encouraged him to begin his task of furthering creation once more. Now Daksha fathered sixty daughters on his exquisite and fecund wife. Ten of these he gave to Dharma Deva, to be his wives; he gave thirteen others to Kashyapa Muni; twenty-seven to Soma Deva; two each to the Rishis Bhuta, Angiras and Krishasva; and the rest he gave to Tarkshya, again.

Dharma's wives were Bhanu, Lamba, Kakubh, Jami, Viswa, Sadhya, Marutvati, Vasu, Muhurta and Sankalpa. Bhanu gave birth to Devarishabha, who begat Indrasena. Lamba's son was Vidyota, whose sons were the gods of the clouds.

Kakubh gave birth to Sankata, who son was Kikata, who begot the spirits that preside over the natural fortresses of the earth. Jami's son was Swarga, whose son was Nandi. Viswa's sons were the Viswedevas, who had no progeny themselves. Sadhya gave birth to the gods called the Sadhyas, and their only son was Arthasiddhi.

Marutvati's sons were the forty-nine Maruts, the wind gods; she also bore Dharma Deva, Jayanta, who is an incarnation of the Lord Narayana and who is known as Upendra, too. Muhurta had the Muhurtikas, the race of gods that bestow the fruit of karma upon men at the apposite time. Sankalpa bore a son bearing her own name; he is the god of thought, of reflection. They say that Kama Deva is Sankalpa's son.

Vasu gave birth to the eight Devas called the Vasus: Drona, Prana, Dhruva, Arka, Agni, Dosa, Vasu and Vibhavasu. Drona sired the gods of joy, sorrow, fear, Harsha, Soka and Bhaya, and the other emotions on his wife Abhimati. Prana begot Sahas, courage, Ayus, longevity, and Purojava upon his wife Urjasvati. Dhruva's wife Dharani was the mother of the ruling spirits of the various towns and cities of the worlds.

Arka, Surya's wife, was Vasana. Tarsha was their son. Agni's wife was Vasu, and they had Dravinaka and some others, all radiant gods. Agni's other wife was Krittika, who was the foster-mother of the Lord Karttikeya. Visakha was Karttikeya's son. Sisumara, the mysterious, was Dosa's son by Sarvari. He was, as we know, Hari's amsa.

Vasu's wife Angirasi gave birth to the divine builder and artist: the incomparable Viswakarman. Viswakarman's wife was Akriti. The sixth Manu, Chakshusa, was born from her, and he, some say, sired the Viswedevas and the Sadhyas. Vibhavasu's wife, Usha, bore him Vyushta, Rochisa and Atapa. The god of day, Panchayama, who keeps beings awake and at their dharma, was Atapa's son.

Bhuta's wife, Sarupa, was mother to millions of Rudras, gods of destruction. The eleven that are their leaders are Raivata, Aja, Bhava, Bhima, Vama, Ugra, Vrishkapi, Ajaikapada, Ahirbudhnya, Bahurupa and Mahan. Bhuta had another wife, herself called Bhuta. She gave birth to the terrible spirits called the Bhutas and the fell Vinayakas, who attend upon the Rudras.

Prajapati Angiras' wife Svadha became the mother of the manes, the Pitrs. Angiras' other wife Sati adopted the fourth Veda, Atharva, as her son. Krishasva's wife Archis bore him Dhrumrakesha. His other wife Dhishana gave him four sons, Vedasiras, Devala, Vayuna and Manu.

Tarkshya, who is Kashyapa, had four wives: Vinata, Kadru, Patangi and Yamini. Patangi became the mother of all the feathered ones, the countless bird species. Yamini gave birth to the locusts. Vinata had a resplendent son called Garuda, who of course is Hari's vahana. She had another son called Aruna, the legless one, who is Surya Deva's charioteer. Kadru became the mother of all serpents.

The twenty-seven nakshatras were married to Soma. But he favoured just Rohini over all the rest and Daksha cursed him. The Moon caught consumption, and though by Siva's blessing he waxes and wanes from the disease, rather than lose his lustre forever, he never had any children.

The daughters of Daksha whom Kashyapa married became the mothers of the worlds and their beings. They are Aditi, Diti, Danu, Kastha, Arishta, Surasa, Ila, Muni, Krodhavasa, Tamra, Surabhi, Sarama and Timi. Timi became the mother of aquatic beings and creatures; the mighty timmingala is named for her. Sarama was the mother of the carnivores, the tigers, lions and the rest. Surabhi gave birth to the sacred cows, the buffaloes, and all bovine creatures and the others with cloven hooves. Tamra was the mother of the birds of prey, the hawks, vultures, kites, eagles and falcons. Muni gave birth to the apsaras, the nymphs.

Krodhavasa was the mother of Dandasuka and the other great and venomous serpents; Ila of the plant and vegetable kingdoms; and Surasa of the yakshas and rakshasas. Arishta bore the gandharvas; Kashta, the equine and asinine species.

Danu had sixty-one great demon sons, called the Danavas. Foremost among them were Dvimurdha, Sambara, Arishta, Hayagriva, Vibhavasu, Ayomukha, Shankusiras, Svarbhanu, Kapila, Aruna, Puloman, Virshparvan, Ekachakra, Anutapana, Dhumrakesa, Virupaksha, Viprachitti and Durjaya.

Namuchi married Svarbhanu's daughter Suprabha. Nahusha's son, the great Yayati, married Vrishparvan's daughter Sarmishta. Danu's son Vaishvanara had four exquisite daughters: Upadanavi, Hayasira, Puloma, and Kalaka. Upadanavi married Hiranyaksha and Hayasira married Kratu. Kashyapa married Puloma and Kalaka, as Brahma told him. Kalaka's sons were the Demons called the Kaalakeyas, known for their savage and warlike natures. One generation of them was known as the Nivatakavachas, whom your grandfather, the peerless Arjuna, killed single-handed, when he visited his father Indra in Devaloka.

On his wife Simhika, Viprachitti begot a hundred and one sons. The eldest of these was Rahu, to whom Vishnu granted planethood when he drank the amrita, and the other hundred did, too; and they are collectively called Ketu. Danu's progeny belonged to the race of darkness: the Asuras, the firstborn beings of creation.

Aditi's sons comprised the race of light, into which Narayana incarnated in amsa. These sons were Vivaswan, Aryaman, Pusan, Tvashtar, Savitr, Bhaga, Dhatr, Vidhatr, Varuna, Mitra, Indra and Trivikrama the Vamana.

Vivasat's wife Samjna gave birth to the Manu Sraddhadeva, and twins called Yama and Yami. Once, she assumed the form of a mare and the handsome Aswinikumaras were born from her, on earth. Vivasat's other wife, Chaya, gave birth to Sanaischara, the planet Saturn, and Savarni Manu. She also had a daughter called Tapati, who married Samvarana.

Aryaman's wife was Matrika. Their sons were called Charshanis, for they had the wisdom of what should not be done. It was from these, that the Lord Brahma evolved the human race. Hence, Aryaman is the ancestor of all humans.

Pusan never had children. He laughed at Lord Siva at Daksha's yagna and had his teeth broken by the gana chieftain Virabhadra. He lived on flour then on, for he could not chew. Rachana, the younger sister of the Daityas became Tvashtar's wife. They begat Samnivesha and Viswarupa.

When Brihaspati abandoned them, the Devas asked Viswarupa to be their Guru," said Suka Deva to the Pandava king.

BRIHASPATI FORSAKES THE DEVAS

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "WHY DID BRIHASPATI ABANDON THE DEVAS?"

Sri Suka said, "Once, the mighty Indra, at the zenith of his power, sat in his glittering court, the Sudharma. He was master of the three worlds; great were his glory and his pride. He sat upon the ruby throne that the worlds worshipped, surrounded by the Maruts, the Vasus, Rudras, Adityas, Ribhus, Viswedevas, Sadhyas, and the Aswini Kumaras. Siddhas, charanas, gandharvas, vidyadharas, Rishis and nagas sang his praises, and apsaras danced for him. Indra's queen Sachi sat beside him under the royal parasol like a full moon above them; she was as lovely as Lakshmi Devi.

Just then, Brihaspati, Guru of the Devas, walked into that court. Indra saw his master, the awesome brahmana, his own preceptor, but neither rose nor greeted the Sage with any reverence. He offered his Guru neither a seat nor arghya. He offered him no worship. Brihaspati paused, stared briefly at the Deva king, turned on his heel and, without a word, walked out of that sabha of splendour. Indra jumped up with a cry, 'Ah, what have I done! Arrogance has seized my heart completely that I dared treat my Guru like this.'

He ran after Brihaspati, but found that the Sage had vanished. Nowhere was the Devaguru to be found. High and low Indra sought his master, his great priest. Across all the realms he sent his messengers to seek him out, but Brihaspati had well and truly disappeared. Now, Indra trembled, fearing what would become of him and his kingdom without his Guru at his side to bless him.

Sure enough, word of Brihaspati's disappearance quickly reached the Asuras. Their Guru Sukra said, 'No better time to attack Amravati.' The Asuras did, at once, and quickly prevailed. Defeated, sorely wounded, the Devas fled to Brahma and stood shaking before him, their heads bent, their arrogance vanished rather like their master.

Brahma said, 'Devas, your enemies, the Asuras, once lost their power when they disrespected their master Sukra Deva. Now, your Guru has abandoned you, and, I fear, cursed you. The demons now worship their master as their God, and not my Brahmaloka is safe from them. They keep their intentions secret and you have no great brahmana to protect you anymore.'

'Lord, what shall we do?' moaned Indra.

Brahma mused for a moment, then said, 'Go to the Rishi Viswarupa. Tvashtar's son has a wealth of tapasya and he will help you if you treat him with reverence.'

The Devas went to Viswarupa. They embraced him, and said, 'We have come to you as guests and in dire need. Young one, we are your uncles and you must not refuse to help us. The Asuras routed us in battle. Even when a young man is himself a father, it is his dharma to serve his parents: most of all, in the case of brahmacharis! The Guru that invests one with the sacred thread and the Veda is the Lord Brahma incarnate. One's father, too, is Lord Brahma, the Creator. One's brother is like Indra, one's mother Bhumi Devi, the blessed Earth, and a sister an amsa of tenderness.

An unexpected visitor is like Dharma Deva, and the guest that stays in one's home is Agni Deva in person. Enlightened child Viswarupa, all creatures are amsas of Vishnu and one must look upon them as one's own self. The demons have routed us because we no longer have a Guru, a brahmana to be our priest, to fetch heaven's blessing down on us. We have come to beg you to be our Guru, and look, we, your elders, prostrate ourselves at your feet!'

And they did, those sovereigns of the elements and the quarters. Moved, Viswarupa said softly to them, 'The greatest Rishis have all condemned priesthood, for it leads inevitably to the loss of spiritual power. But how, O Devas, can I refuse what you ask, Lords of worlds? Surely, for me wisdom lies in doing what you want, O my elders.'

Rishi Viswarupa became the Devas' priest and Guru and performed every ritual they wanted, immaculately. With occult power and mantras, he took the Asuras' fortune from them, though their Guru Sukra protected them, and gave that ascendant fortune to the Devas. He taught thousand-eyed Indra the recondite lore of the Narayana kavacha, Vishnu's own armour, and with its power Indra and his people shattered the demon forces. Wearing the unseen, impenetrable armour of the Lord, Indra went among the Asuras as a lion among lesser beasts, and they had no answer to his prowess," said Suka.

Parikshit asked, "What is this secret armour, the Narayana kavacha?"

Vyasa's son, the great Suka, replied, "Viswarupa taught Indra the way of that magical armour, for it is no less than a high and mystic path to save oneself from danger. He made Indra wash his hands and feet, and sip holy water in achamana. He made him put on a ring of kusa grass, and sit upon the ground facing the north. Purified, and quietening his mind, Indra performed the ritual called nyasa, consecrating the various limbs of his body with mantras of eight and twelve syllables: *Aum namo Narayanaya*, and *Aum namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*.

Then, Indra donned the mystic kavacha, by visualising the Lord located in his feet, his knees, his thighs, his stomach, his chest, his heart, his mouth and the crown of his head. He spiritualised his entire body with Vishnu Narayana's mantra of protection. He repeated the process in reverse, beginning with the top of his head; this is called samhara nyasa. He sheathed his hands with *Aum namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*, imbuing his fingers, his thumbs, with the power of the spirit.

He sheathed himself in the simplest Vishnu mantra *Aum Vishnave namah*: the *Aum* in his heart; the *Vi* upon the top of his head; *sh* between his eyebrows; *na* on the tuft of his hair; *ve* in his eyes: to spiritualise them; *na* in every joint of his body, *mah* the missile, the astra. He ended with *Phat*, casting spirit protection on all sides, keeping evil at bay, saying *astrayah phat!*

while snapping his fingers loudly. Any man that does this becomes that mantra incarnate; he is safe from all sides.

The devotee then meditates, as Indra once did, upon the Absolute Lord Vishnu, who is endowed with the six immortal potencies: sovereignty over the universe, righteousness, glory, affluence, supreme knowledge and detachment from the world. The bhakta thinks of himself as being identical with this God. He intones the Narayana kavacha as the embodiment of learning, energy and penance.

May Hari, who is the sacred syllable AUM, give me protection on all sides and in every respect – he whose lotus feet rest upon the back of the golden king of birds, the immortal Garuda; who is the source of the eight great siddhis, anima, mahima and the others; who has eight arms and a different cosmic weapon in every hand of those arms: the conch, disk, shield, sword, mace, arrows, bow and a noose.

May Hari the Matsya guard me from the sharks and whales and crocodiles in water, and from Varuna's paasa. May Vishnu, the Kuurma, save me from all the narakas. May Vamana protect me on land, and the Trivikrama of the three strides that He became watch over me in the sky. May Narasimha, the Manticore at whose awesome laughter the cardinal points shook and the asuris aborted the embryos in their wombs, protect me in dangerous forests, fields of battle and suchlike. May the Varaha Murti protect me whenever I travel, and the Lord Parasurama upon mountain peaks. May the matchless Rama and his brother Lakshmana protect me when I journey in foreign lands. May Narayana himself shield me from black magic and save me from committing any rashness or foolishness. May the Lord Nara save me from hubris, Datta, lord of the yagna, from the chasms along the highway of yoga; may Kapila, who controls sattva, rajas and tamas, save me from the bondage of karma.

May Sanatkumara save me from Kama Deva; may the Lord Hayagriva keep me on the path of religion, making sure I worship the Gods every day; may great Narada Muni save me from the thirty-three sins whilst worshipping the Paramatman. May the Lord Dhanvantari ensure that the food I eat is clean and pure. May the Lord Rishabha, who has conquered his mind, help me transcend the pleasure and pain, happiness and sorrow; may Yagna protect me from the world's censure; Balabhadra from violence and being murdered: from Yama Deva; may the Lord Anantasesha guard me against the venomous krodhavasas.

May Vyasa Dwaipayana enlighten me, remove my ignorance; the Lord Buddha save me from heretics and the neglect of my dharma. May awesome Kalki, who has come to redeem the earth in the evil kali yuga, save me from its ubiquitous vileness. May Keshava protect me with his mace during the first sixth part of the day; Krishna during the next muhurta; Narayana in the forenoon; Vishnu at noon; Madhusudana in the afternoon; Madhava, who is Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra, in the evening; Hrishikesha during night's first yaama; Padmanabha during night's second yaama and at midnight; he that bears the Srivatsa upon his breast during the next yaama of the night; and the Lord Janardhana during the dawn, the fifth yaama of night. May Mahavishnu, who manifests himself as Kaala, Time, watch over me during the three sandhyas.

The Lord Vishnu casts the Sudarshana, which is time's very wheel, the disk whose edge is made from the fires of the apocalypse. I pray the Sudarshana Chakra immolates my enemies, makes ashes of them as a common fire fanned by a good wind does a pile of dry grass.

The Kaumodaki is as dear to me as its Lord. Peerless Mace, the sparks that fly from you, when your master discharges you, are, each one, like Indra's vajra: to make ashes of all my enemies. O Panchajanya, when Krishna sets you to his perfect lips and blows, his enemies' hearts are convulsed with terror. As the Kaumodaki puts the evil spirits Kusumanda, Vinayaka, and yakshas, rakshasas and grahas that torment children to flight, your clear notes make yatudhanas, pramathas, bhutas, matrikas – the female vampires that come posing as sweet mothers – pisachas and brahmarakshasas flee in dread.

O glittering Nandaka, sharper than every other blade, which shreds any that dare stand before Narayana, and the shield of the Lord, brilliant as a thousand moons, which blinds his enemies' hosts not for a time, but for ever! You, great spirits, I worship.

All the planets and comets, the Ketus, men, reptiles, carnivores, goblins, my own sins that fetched fear to my heart: may all these that prevented my wellbeing be as ashes by the spirit fires of the incomparable astra that is the Lord's mantra and his subtle form.

May Garuda, who is the Veda embodied, who is extolled in the Brihad, the Rathantara and the Sama hymns and Viswaksena protect us from every peril, because we utter their most sacred names in bhakti, and chant their mantras. May all the names, forms, craft and the thousand arms of Hari watch over us. May his matchless servitors protect and illumine our intellects, our indriyas, our minds and our prana.

The glorious Lord is all things, gross and spiritual, sukshma and sthula. By realising this truth, and its force, may our sorrows and troubles end. To those that have fathomed their own identity with the Lord, he is always with them. For the rest, by his own maya, he wields power by ornaments, weapons and insignia. He is omnipresent: may he save us from every danger.

May Narasimha, who dispels fear with his roar, who eclipses the brilliance of the suns by the light of his body, watch over us in the ten directions, their corners, in the sky and in patala, upon the earth, from within and from without.

'O Indra,' said Viswarupa Muni, 'this is the Narayana kavacha. Put it on and you will conquer the legions of darkness. Anyone who is touched, even fleetingly, by he that wears this subtle armour is immediately freed from fear. Why, the very sight of a wearer of the Narayana kavacha can liberate a man from terror and he then never feels the slightest twinge of the dark emotion from kings, brigands, evil planets, demons and spirits, or the most savage beasts,'" Suka said to the Pandava king.

Parikshit sat utterly absorbed to listen to the resonant syllables of the mantra. Suka said, "Once, in time out of mind, there was a brahmana of the Kaushika gotra who mastered the sacred kavacha. When his time came, he cast off his body in the midst of a desert, with yoga. Some years later, the gandharva king Chitraratha happened to fly over this desert in his vimana. Suddenly, his gleaming skyship spun out of control and plunged down into the sand. It would not move. Finally, the Rishi Valakhilya told the disconsolate elf to gather the dead brahmana's bones and immerse them in the golden Saraswati, where it turns east. Chitraratha did so, bathed in the river, and his vimana rose again on its own and flew to him.

Most of all, O Kshatriya, listening to the Narayana kavacha liberates a man from fear, especially in times of danger. Indra became sovereign of the three realms again, when Viswarupa Muni taught him the kavacha and the Deva then crushed the Asura armies sent against him by Sukra."

VRITRASURA

SUKA CONTINUED, "MUNI VISWARUPA HAD THREE HEADS: ONE HE USED to drink Soma rasa, the second to drink wine, and the third to eat. During the yagna he performed for the Devas, he offered them their havis directly, with his own hands, chanting *Indrayah idam, this is for Indra:* for the Devas were his ancestors. He secretly offered a portion of the burnt offerings to the Asuras, too, as Brahma had warned, for his mother belonged to the eldest race, of darkness.

Indra noticed this, and after he had quelled the demons, he cut off Viswarupa's heads in anger. The head with which the Rishi drank Soma rasa became the kapinjala bird, the one with which he drank wine, the kalvinka, and the one he used to eat became the tittiri. With folded hands, Indra accepted his sin of brahmahatya. He performed penance for a year to expiate that sin; at the year's end he could not bear the torment anymore and shared the sin out between the earth, water, trees and young women.

The earth accepted her portion of Indra's brahmahatya as long as any pits that marred her face would fill naturally in due course. The brahmahatya manifested itself upon Bhumi Devi as barren lands, where nothing grows. The trees took a fourth of Indra's sin provided that any part of them that is lopped off shall grow with greater force and vigour than before. Indra's brahmahatya is seen upon trees as resin, gum. The young women took a fourth of Indra's sin upon the condition that even while they were pregnant they would feel desire. In them Indra's sin manifests as their monthly periods. The waters accepted the final fourth part of the sin of the slaying of Muni Viswarupa; their condition was that they would increase the quantity of anything with which they are mixed. The sin is seen as foam and bubbles in flowing water. He that removes the froth and the bubbles from water removes water's sin.

The pure Muni Viswarupa was Tvashtar's son. When Indra killed Viswarupa, the livid Tvashtar performed a homa, a fierce sacrifice. The flames of the dakshinagni rose tall and golden before him at the reverberant mantras he chanted. Finally Tvashtar cried, 'Come forth, O slayer of Indra, be thou mighty!'

An Asura rose smoking from the agnikunda. He was as great and awesome as Yama, the God Death, when Yama assumes his most terrific form at the end of the yugas. Then on, each day that Demon grew prodigiously, in every direction, to the extent of the flight of an arrow. He looked like a great volcano, and was as bright as a mass of clouds above the setting sun. His hair and his beard were the colour of molten copper; his eyes shone like the sun at high noon. His blinding trisula pierced heaven's dome. He danced and roared wildly, so the earth shook beneath his gargantuan feet. His mouth was like a valley, yawned open as if to drink the sky, swallow the three worlds; and his tongue was like a streak of cosmic lightning that would lick up the stars.

In that dreadful maw immeasurable tusks gleamed, and men, beasts and all creatures fled from this horrible, unprecedented Demon. Tvashtar's son was called Vritra, the Terrible. He covered the earth with the shadow of his immense body, looming over everything.

Indra and his Devas attacked Vritrasura. They shot every astra that they ruled at him. He yawned open his mouth and, laughing like thunder among galaxies, swallowed those blazing weapons of the Gods. With the astras inside him, he shone more brilliantly than before and was more formidable still. Their power and lustre eclipsed, the Devas fled to Lord Vishnu.

Indra cried, 'Narayana, Antaryamin, save us from Vritrasura, whom even Yama fears: Death whom the panchamahabhutas worship and the three worlds, whom even Brahma and we Devas propitiate. This Demon laughs in Yama's face! Vishnu, Paramatman, Serene, Supreme One, this universe is just your maya, Lord. But we beg you, save us from this Vritrasura.'

As they worshipped Vishnu, he manifested himself, a mass of light. His eyes were like the full-blown lotuses of autumn. Sixteen splendent servitors waited on him: all blue and four-armed like him, all carrying disk and mace, conch and bow. But they did not have either the ruby Kaustubha or the Srivatsa whorl upon their breasts.

Overwhelmed, swept by ecstasy, the Devas lay on their faces and worshipped Vishnu. Then, rising slowly, they began to sing his praises, calling him Pranava, the *AUM* incarnate: he that appears in the hearts of the greatest Paramahamsas who worship him, to break down the door of darkness in their hearts and let in infinite light; the abode of galaxies, the most ancient, supreme Person, the most merciful, glorious Sovereign; the Devi Lakshmi's consort.

They spoke of the sea of joy that wells in the hearts of bhaktas, when they taste just a drop of his essential being. Then Indra said, 'Lord, you know what we have come to beg of you. Bless us Vishnu; kill Vritrasura, who has devoured our astras and now devours the three worlds.'

Hari said, 'Bless you, Devas, your hymn will awaken bhakti in the dullest jivas. But go now to the Rishi Dadichi, and ask him for his body, made strong by the Brahmavidya. Dadhyan Muni is united with the Parabrahman. He taught the Aswini Kumaras the secret vidya, and he was called Aswasiras, for when he gave them the secret gyana he had a horse's face. The Brahmavidya made the Aswins immortal in their bodies. Dadhyan taught Tvashtar the Narayana kavacha; Tvashtar gave it to his son Viswarupa, who then taught it to you.'

Of course, the Aswini Kumaras were among the Devas who had come to petition Vishnu. He said to them, 'If you two beg him for his body, he will not refuse. Then, from his bones of adamant, Viswakarman must create a weapon for Indra, a diamond thunderbolt of a thousand joints. With that, you can behead Vritrasura. When the Demon dies, glory, power and wealth will all return to you. You shall have your astras back. I bless you, my bhaktas, and no one shall harm you!' said refulgent Vishnu and vanished.

The Devas stood staring unwinkingly at where the Blue God had stood. In a while, they tore themselves away and flew to the Rishi Dadichi's asrama. The great Muni of the Atharvan clan knew what they had come for. He said to them, smiling mischievously, 'Devas, you are immortal and cannot imagine the excruciating pain that embodied beings suffer when they die. One's body is certainly the first and dearest possession anyone has. Who will give it away, even to Vishnu if he asks for it?'

The Devas said, 'O Brahman embodied! For you, who are an avatara of compassion, there is nothing you cannot give away. Lord, we do not beg this favour lightly, only because we are in dire danger. The harmony of the universe depends upon your grace.'

Dadhyana said, gently now, 'He that will not give his very life, if asked for it, is to be pitied even by the stones of the earth. How can one seek joy if not in the joy of all creatures? This is the sanatana dharma, simple and always true. Devas, if you want my body I give it to you willingly, why, with delight!'

The Rishi Dadichi stilled his mind. He restrained his senses, the prana flowing into and out of his body, his mind and his intellect. He set just the Absolute Brahman before him, seeing nothing else, becoming entirely absorbed. Life left his mortal limbs, and he was never aware of passing on. From Dadichi's bones of adamant Viswakarman made the thunderbolt called the Vajra, and gave it to Indra.

Indra felt the power of the Lord suffuse his being, flow in his limbs of light. He mounted his white elephant, four-tusked Airavata, and flew at the Asura Vritra. A duel ensued between them that shook the constellations. Stars spun from their ellipses through infinity. The two fought on the banks of the river Narmada, at the outset of the treta yuga. This was the very first manvantara.

Vritra saw Indra surrounded by his host of Rudras, Vasus,. Adityas, Aswinikumaras, the Pitrs, the Agni devas, the Vayu devas, the Ribhus, Sadhyas and Viswedevas. Around the great Demon teemed his own dark and mighty legions, led by Namuchi, Sambara, Anarva, the two-headed Dvimurdha Rishabha, the horsefaced Ambara Hayagriva, Shankusirsa, Viprachitti, Ayomukha, Puloman, Vrishaparvan, Praheti, Heti, Utkala, the sons of Diti and Danu, Mali and Sumali. Yakshas, other goblins and ogres in thousands, demons, ghouls and monsters of every kind comprised Vritra's hideous army.

This force calmly faced Indra's host, from which even Death would have shied away. Roaring from a million wild throats, like some single unimaginable Lion, they attacked the Devas with all sorts of weapons: maces, iron bars, arrows like locust swarms, javelins gleaming like strips of green flame, pikes, axes, swords, shatagnis, bhusundis: all blazing occult fires. The demons' weapons covered the brilliant gods as clouds do the sun and the moon. But the Devas were as quick as the many forms of light of which they are the lords; they were as imperturbable as the elements they rule. They cut and ashed the Asuras' astras, and all their weapons, so not one pierced the divine and illustrious targets at which they were loosed.

The demons now cast mountain peaks, great trees and sundry crags at the Deva forces. The gods smashed them as before. The foulest abuse of the vulgar-spirited leaves the noble unruffled; so were the Devas serene at the demon onslaughts: for they had Hari Narayana's blessing. The arrogant, violent Asuras were dispirited and thought to flee the battle, abandoning their leaders. Vritra saw his warriors turn to run. He laughed like thunder, arresting them at once.

In his voice deep as the sea, he spoke to them. 'O Viprachitti, Namuchi, Puloman! O Mayaa, Anarvan, Sambara, hear me! Death, my friends, is inescapable for anyone born; not the greatest men, not the gods and demons have yet found a cure for it. If glory and heaven follow death, why should one run from it? Should one not embrace it instead? There are two deaths that the wise welcome most: the one where a man leaves his body with yoga, and the other when he dies in battle, never turning his back on his enemy, fighting until he falls!'

But his Asuras were so terrified and demoralised they were hardly in the mood to listen to him. Vritra was annoyed. Now he raged at the Devas, 'O my enemies of light, what do you gain by shooting these fleeing fools in their backs? They are worth less than their mothers' faeces. Killing a coward never fetched any hero into heaven. If you have any heart for battle, come fight me!' cried that Demon, looming before the Gods like a planet.

Vritrasura threw back his head and gave a roar that made the Devas swoon, as if they had been struck by their king's Vajra. As the bull elephant in musth tramples a pool of lotuses, Vritra trampled the soldiers of light, gandharvas, kinnaras, charanas and the Devas, as they lay unconscious before him. In fury Indra hurled his mace at the Demon. At it flashed at him, swift as light, potent as lightning, Vritra caught it like a toy in his left hand.

Quicker than seeing, he smashed Airavata with that mace on his mouth, and the white elephant gave a dismal bellow. Blood filling his mouth, the great tusker staggered back seven bows' distance, his eyes dilated with fear. Then Indra laid his hands of power upon his beast, and the stunned Airavata recovered instantly, his wound healing, the blood stanched. Airavata stood firm against the roaring Demon.

Vritrasura, Tvashtar's son, now remembered how Indra had murdered his beautiful brother Viswarupa, a story his father never tired of telling him. His heart and eyes filled with grief. He saw Indra facing him, the Vajra in his hand and said softly, though his great voice shook the earth, 'Indra, I am happy to see you before me, brahmana slayer, killer of your own Guru, who was my blemishless brother. I shall be happier when my trisula pierces your evil, deceitful heart.

My brother was an innocent, a Muni, and you cut off his heads like a yagnapasu's, while he sat plunged in dhyana, unsuspecting, trusting you perfectly. Why, cannibals might hold you beneath contempt, O Indra, for having no shame, grace, mercy or honour. I will tear you apart with my trisula and vultures shall feed on your flesh. As for your followers, I will offer them to the bhairava lords of bhutas, that they dare attack me, Vritra, with their puny missiles.

And if by chance, O Deva, you do manage to behead me with your new weapon made of Dadhyan's bones, why, I shall find immortal fame and a place in heaven among the undying stars. I shall find a place and eternal grace at the golden feet of the greatest Rishis of the universe. Come Indra, cast your puny astra at me, and be certain it will be as effectual as asking a loan from a miser.'

Then he paused, that unequalled Demon, and said thoughtfully, 'Yet, perhaps it is time for me to perish, because the Lord Hari calls me to his feet. Narayana, I do not aspire to Dhruva's realm, loftier than Devaloka. I do not wish to be a Brahma, and have sovereignty over the three worlds. Why, I do not want the greatest siddhis that might be mine, not even nirvana, O Vishnu, if that takes me away from your lotus feet.

You are all I yearn for, like a fledgling for its mother, a beloved for her lover, a calf for a cow. As I range the cycle of samsara, let me always be your bhakta and be free of the friendship of those whose minds are attached to their bodies, their wives and children, their lands and their gold.'

Mighty, noble Vritra, born an Avenger, raised his trisula and rushed at Indra, even as the ancient Asura Kaitabha had, once, rushed at Vishnu upon the cosmic waters of the Pralaya. The prongs of that trident blazed with flames as incandescent as the fires of the Pralaya. With another sky-shaking roar, Vritra cast his trident at the king of the Devas. It was brilliant so one could not look at it, as it flared at the Deva. Indra coolly cast his Vajra at the ayudha of three fires, shattering the deadly thing. The Vajra blazed on and took one of Vritra's arms from his shoulder in a blast of gore. The arm fell on the ground, as long and thick as the body of the great Vasuki; it writhed there for some moments, then grew still.

Spouting blood from his naked shoulder, in a great geyser, Vritra dashed at Indra and struck both him and his elephant an enormous blow with his left hand. The thunderbolt slipped from the stunned Deva's grasp, and lay on the ground. Indra sat there, dazed, humbled, shamefaced, not daring to pick up his weapon again. The Deva host fell hushed; then murmurs of alarm rippled through the army of the gods.

Great Vritrasura laughed softly, contemptuously. He said to Indra, 'Go on, Deva, pick up your Vajra and kill your enemy.

Fate controls the lives of all beings, and their deaths. The only exception is the Parama Purusha, the First Omniscient Being. The worlds and their Gods live and indulge in karma by the will of this Being, the Kaalatman. Knowing none of this, men identify themselves with their mortal bodies, forgetting the eternal Lord within their hearts. He controls everything, and we are deceived that we are the doers. No moment of our lives is in our hands.

When fate wills, we are born. Fortune and misfortune, labour and rest, bright and dark, good and evil befall us, each in their time, as ordained by destiny. One should cast a cold eye upon these opposite things: honour and dishonour, poverty and wealth, victory and defeat, pleasure and pain, and yes, even life and death. This is the only wisdom. And this wisdom can be obtained only with God's grace.

The man who knows that sattva, rajas and tamas are but the modes of nature, not the essences of the Soul, who is always an actless witness to the interplay of these gunas, that man is illumined and freed from the bonds of samsara. Look at me, O Indra, You have vanquished me and sloughed off my arm with your Vajra. Yet, I shall fight you, and never give in to my last breath. That is my dharma.

A field of battle is a final gambling house: life is the stake, arrows the dice and our men and beasts the board across which the dice roll. But, finally, only Time knows who will win and who will lose the day, who will live and who die.'

Indra was silent for a long moment, gazing at this amazing adversary, this calm and enlightened Demon. He joined his hands to show respect for his enemy, then said with a laugh, 'Danava, you are truly a siddha! Why, you are more, you are a true bhakta, the highest sort, of the Lord who rules the universe. Ignorance does not blind you, and you speak in wonderful wisdom at this moment of your direst peril. Great Vritra, I bow to you that laugh in Death's very face!

The Lord's maya does not delude you, Asura. I am astonished that you, a demon, rajasic by nature, are such a devotee of the sattvik Lord Hari. A bhakta like you drinks from the ocean of amrita. What do the ditches and gutters, which are the pleasures of Devaloka, mean to you, Great Vritra, noblest of my enemies?'

And they fought again. Vritra cast a fell mace at the king of the Devas, with his left hand. Indra smashed the weapon with his Vajra, and took Vritra's remaining arm from its shoulder in another eruption of blood. The grand Demon was like a mountain of old, with its wings sheared. Blood flowed copiously down his mountainous body. His lower jaw touching the earth, his head brushing the heavens, his mouth another sky, his tongue a great Naga, his fangs like Yama's, he seemed about to swallow the three worlds.

He stamped the ground so the stars shook, and in a wink dashed at Indra and swallowed the Deva and his Airavata, even as the greatest python does an elephant! The hosts of Devaloka set up a shocked lament; but protected by the Narayana kavacha, and being masters of many yogic siddhis, neither Indra nor Airavata died, but sank down into Vritra's chasmic belly. Indra rent the Asura's stomach from within with the Vajra, flew out again and hewed off Vritra's head with his thunderbolt made of Dadhyan Muni's bones of adamant. It is told that the Vajra took two ayanas, three hundred and sixty days, to behead that awesome Danava. At last, his head fell onto the earth even like another planet.

Drumrolls sounded in the sky; gandharvas, siddhas and great companies of Rishis showered unearthly blooms down on their triumphant king. They sang his praises. Just then, a pulsating light issued like a comet from Vritra's corpse, rose scintillating, and was subsumed in the Paramatman. Vritrasura received moksha.

As soon as Vritrasura perished all the worlds and their guardian deities felt a wave of relief, all save Indra. They felt freed from the terrible fear that had bound their hearts for so long. The Devas, Rishis, Brahma and Rudra, and all the other celestial ones flew back to their own homes in the sky. But Indra stood stricken yet by the dreadful sin of brahmahatya, of killing the brahmana Demon," said Sri Suka to the absorbed Parikshit.

INDRA

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "TELL ME ABOUT INDRA'S SIN, MY LORD. DID HE SUFFER from it; did he finally find expiation? How, O Suka Deva?"

Suka said, "When Vritra ruled the worlds, the Devas and Rishis begged Indra to kill him. Indra remembered well the year of his torment after he killed Viswarupa, before the earth, water, trees and women agreed to share his brahmahatya. He was reluctant; he trembled. He asked, 'Where shall I find expiation for killing another brahmana?'

The Rishis reassured him, 'We will perform an aswamedha yagna, to remove your sin. If you worship Narayana, you can consume a world of brahmanas and be absolved of brahmahatya. What, then, of one brahmana? Sing the Lord's names, and you shall find expiation for killing a brahmana, your own father, mother, Guru, anyone. By saying the Lord's name a sudra becomes a brahmana!

We will perform such an aswamedha, making you the yajaka, that even if you were to kill Brahma himself, you would feel no terror. What then, an evil one like Vritra?'

And so Indra killed Vritrasura. As soon as the great Demon died, his brahmahatya attacked Indra savagely. He had no peace of mind; terror beset his every moment. Nightmares ruled his sleep, anxiety his waking. Indra felt that all creation censured him, pointed fingers of blame. Then, he saw his sin, his brahmahatya, as a dreadful chandala hag. Her twisted body shook with age and she had consumption. Her clothes were bloody; her grey hair dishevelled and loose, she cried to Indra to stop and face her.

She spoke in a rasp and her breath was like a fetid blast of rotten fish.

Thousand-eyed Indra ran quick as a thought, and hid himself in the Manasarovara. Indra plunged into the stalk of a lotus and remained hidden there, while the brahmahatya scoured the ten directions for him. Indra went hungry, for it is Agni that feeds him burnt offerings, the havis from every yagna, and of course, the Fire God cannot enter water.

For a thousand years, Indra remained submerged, hidden, starving, suffering, wondering how and when he could find absolution. Meanwhile, Devaloka had no sovereign and the Gods made Nahusha, of the race of Pururavas, their king, until Indra returned. Nahusha ruled wisely for a short time, but was then overwhelmed by arrogance that he was heaven's king. He lusted after Indra's wife Sachi, and ordered her to become his queen. So vain had Nahusha become that, to impress Puloma's daughter, he had the Rishis of Devaloka bear his palanquin to Sachi's palace on his way to marry her. He insulted the great Agastya during this progress, kicking that Muni and saying *sarpa, sarpa*, which meant *hurry, hurry*. Sarpa, of course, also means snake. At once, Agastya cursed Nahusha to become a python and fall down into the world below.

Meanwhile, within his lotus stem, after some time, Indra fixed his mind in dhyana on the Lord Vishnu. In the north, the Lord Rudra, sovereign of that direction, weakened the horrible crone, the sin brahmahatya, until she dissolved. The Devi Mahalakshmi protected Indra. The Rishis discovered where Indra was hidden and went there to undertake the aswamedha yagna, and to make ashes of the enormous sin of the Deva king. When they worshipped Vishnu with the aswamedha, Indra's sin melted away like frost under the summer sun.

The king of the Devas had his former power and glory, and his throne in Devaloka, the throne that the three worlds worship. The wise listen to this tale on the days of amavasta and paurnima. It makes a man prosperous, washes away his sins, gives him victory over his enemies, and bestows long life," the peerless Suka said to Parikshit.

Parikshit asked, "My lord, Vritra was an Asura, his nature of rajas and tamas, and hardly any sattva. How did he have such bhakti for Hari

Narayana? Even the Devas, whose natures are dominantly sattvik, scarcely have such faith as the Danava showed in the face of death. The species of this earth are numerous as grains of sand upon a seashore. Yet few, the human race among these, are given the gift of dharma. Brahmana, of these few how many seek moksha? Perhaps some thousands. And of these thousands, it is only one in an age who does manage to find freedom from the bonds of samsara and maya.

Across the manvantaras, surely many siddhas have attained vairagya, detachment. Millions have certainly realised the eternal flame of the Atman burning within them. Yet, how many among these holiest of men truly achieve perfect bhakti for the Lord Narayana? The Asura Vritra, bane of the worlds, did. How else could he have been so steadfast in battle? How else could he have laughed so calmly in Death's face? Who was this Vritrasura? How did he possess such an implacably devout spirit?"

Suka smiled at the kshatriya's keen question, and replied, "I heard this tale from the lips of my father Vyasa, who heard it from Narada and Devala.

Once, in another kalpa, there was a sovereign king of the earth whose name was Chitraketu. He ruled the kingdom known as Surasena. The earth yielded whatever he desired from her; such was his dharma. He had a million wives! Such was his virility. Yet, he had no son from any of those lovely women. Chitraketu owned everything that a great kshatriya of the earth should have, in qualities and possessions, but he suffered terribly from not being a father.

One day, it happened that Angiras, glorious Muni, arrived in Chitraketu's palace. The king received him reverently, offering him arghya and madhurparka. He made the Sage sit in a throne of honour, and then sat on the floor at the Maharishi's feet.

Pleased at the kshatriya's devotion, Angiras asked kindly, 'Maharaja, does your kingdom prosper, and your subjects? Are you in the best of health, for the king is the soul of his kingdom. Are your ministers, your wives, your people, your servants, your subject kings and your sons obedient to you? If your mind is restrained, O Chitraketu, then the world shall obey you without being asked. Why the Devas worship a king that controls his mind.

But Chitraketu, I see a shadow of sorrow upon your face, as if some great trouble gnaws at your heart. It seems to me your mind is pleased neither with yourself nor with those around you. You have some powerful desire that you have not been able to fulfil. Share your grief with me, my son, perhaps I can even help you.'

Chitraketu bowed deeply and said, 'Swami, there is nothing in the three worlds or times that a Mahatma like you, who has made ashes of your sins, does not know. Yet since you ask me why I am distraught, I will tell you. My lord, surely, great is my kingdom, my sovereign power and my wealth; the Devas might envy these. They give me no pleasure, but are like sandalwood paste, fine ornaments or garlands of flowers to a man dying of hunger and thirst.

Muni, I am on the lip of an abyss, a pit of hell. I beg you, save me, save my clan and my people – O mighty Angiras, bless me with sons! I cannot bear this torment anymore.'

Brahma's son, the Maharishi, was moved. He asked king Chitraketu to order his cooks to prepare some charu, rice cooked in milk, and offered it solemnly to Tvashtar, pouring it over a vedi he made to that deity. He then called Chitraketu's first queen, Kritadyuti, and gave her what remained of the charu offering to eat.

Angiras said to the king, 'Kshatriya, you shall have one son and he will bring you both joy and grief.' With that, the Sage left the kingdom of Surasena.

Quickly, queen Kritadyuti became pregnant, and her child grew within her day by day, even as the moon waxes. When her time was full, she gave birth to a fine, lustrous son. The king had his prince's jatakarma performed; he gave away gold, silver, silks, ornaments, horses, elephants, cows and whole villages to the brahmans who performed the birth ceremonies for his son. He gave wealth and other gifts to friends and to the needy, as generously as a raincloud does its showers.

The father Chitraketu loved his son like the impoverished man that toils his way to riches does his hard-earned gold. The boy's mother Kritadyuti glowed in the soft contentment of motherhood, but the king's other wives became feverishly jealous of her. They, too, were desperate to have their own children, most of all because now Chitraketu gave his private time only to the mother of his son, and ignored his other wives.

Those women tortured themselves with self-recrimination. They said there was no creature on earth as cursed as a barren woman. They said they were as unfortunate as slaves of slaves. Finally, they conspired together and one afternoon poisoned the prince's food. For a time, Kritadyuti thought her child was asleep. Then she asked one of her sakhis to fetch him to her; he had slept long enough. That woman saw the child's pupils dilated and turned up in his eyes, and no breath stirred in his little chest. She gave a scream and fell on the floor wailing and beating her breast.

Kritadyuti came running on hearing the commotion, saw her child lying lifeless and fell in a dead faint. The news spread like fire through the palace. When Chitraketu heard, he instantly lost the vision of his eyes, as if his son had been that vision and was now gone. Blindly the king staggered down the passages of his palace and fell at the foot of his dead prince's cot. His chest heaved in gasps; ragged sighs and moans were torn from him; he could not speak a word. Waking from her swoon and seeing her husband the queen began to scream shrilly.

Why, that woman cursed God, crying, 'Lord, you are a fool that you keep the old alive and claim the young! How do you so savagely rend the bonds of love and attachment that are so necessary for the nurture of a young life? Why did you bless us with a son, if you always meant to snatch him from us so heartlessly?'

She turned to her lifeless boy and howled, 'How could you be so merciless, O my son? Look at me, look at your father; will we ever recover from the vicious blow you have struck us? How could you even dream of leaving us? You were meant to be the light with which we crossed the black naraka we were plunged in, the hell of the childless. Oh, my son, my son, I beg you, don't go far with Yama. Return to me!

Look, your little friends have come to call you to play in the garden. Get up now, you have slept enough. You must be hungry, my darling, eat something now. Ah, get up, get up, and let me hear your sweet voice!'

Chitraketu sobbed like a child; he roared in grief. Everyone around them, ministers and servants, stood stunned, many crying themselves. Suddenly, the Muni Angiras appeared there with Narada. The two cosmic Sages came disguised as mad and wild Avadhutas and roused the grieving king; they made him get up from the floor where he lay.

One after the other, they spoke to him. Angiras said, 'You grieve over an illusion of love, Kshatriya. Until your son was born, did you know him? Did you know his soul? Where was he before he became your prince? Did you know him in your past lives? Shall you know him in your future ones? Who is he to you, that you grieve like this over him?'

Narada said, 'Thousands of children are dying this moment; how is it you do not grieve for them? The relationships of people are like grains of sand in flowing water. They come together briefly, then flow apart again. As seeds blown in the wind may or may not produce grains of corn, so too, bhutas may or may not produce bhutas.

You and I, all of us, were not together before this birth. We shall not be after we die. This life of attachments is a dream; past and future are unreal. The Lord of bhutas, of spirits, of all beings, is Un-born himself. He has no purpose to achieve by creation; all this is just his maya, his divine play.'

Angiras said, 'Chitraketu, for sure a child's body is born from his father's seed and his mother's womb. But the jiva within his body is eternal, even like the earth. It is neither fathered nor mothered mortally. It is karma that deludes you and makes you think the jiva that occupied your prince's body was ever your son. It is maya.'

Narada added, 'When you see a serpent or a tiger in a dream, you are afraid. Yet the cause of the fear is unreal. So, too, all this samsara is a dream, and there is neither fear nor grief when you awaken from it. It is the mind that makes one attached to the world of wives, children and possessions. It is the ego that makes one love and hate. The "me" and the "mine" are delusions. The only escape from them is the Lord Narayana. Fix your mind upon him, O Kshatriya, and he will free you from pain.'

Even more than the Sages' words, their great and illumined presences calmed the stricken Chitraketu and his queen.

Now Chitraketu asked, 'Who are you, so wise, that have come here in the guise of Avadhutas? I know that the Lord's greatest bhaktas range the world as madmen, to show fools like me the way towards illumination. I have heard that Sanatkumara, Narada, Ribhu, Angiras, Devala, Amita, Apantaratma, Vyasa, Markandeya and Gautama roam the earth disguised, to quicken the gross and the sensual and the attached, and point them in the way towards moksha.

Vasistha Muni, the magnificent Parasurama, Kapila, Suka Deva, Durvasa, Yagnavalkya, Jatukaranya, Aruni, Romasa, Chyvana, Datta, Patanjali, Asuri, Vedasiras, Bodhya and Panchasiras: all these go among men to achieve the ends of nirvana, as do Hiranyanabha, Kausalya, Srutadeva, Ritadhvaja, and other profound masters, too.

And now, in my moment of crisis, you two gurus have appeared in my palace. Enlighten me, my lords, I beg you show me the way out of the torture that besets me.'

With a wave of his hands, Angiras stood revealed before the king. He said, 'I am Angiras, Kshatriya, who blessed you with a son in the first place. And this is Brahmaputra Narada Muni. We saw you, a bhakta of the Lord, plunged in black sorrow, as you should never be, and we came here to fetch you out of your grief. Chitraketu, when I first came to your home, I would have enlightened you with the Brahmagyana, but I saw that you yearned powerfully for something else: a son. Such a potent and consuming desire must first be fulfilled before a man can progress towards the light of his soul.

So I blessed you with a son. Now you know the agony of men who become fathers. Similar are the fates of men who own and are addicted to wives, houses, wealth, power, any sort of prosperity or pleasure, why, every enjoyment. All these are just sources of grief, terror and pain, for each one is as fleeting as the gandharva cities of the sky. They are dreams, illusions, the results of past karma; none of them is real.

The objective world of relationships and attachments that you see and sense and live in is all an illusion, Kshatriya. Only the Atman, the soul inside you is real. Abandon the rest, seek out the soul within and you will find unchanging, eternal peace and the joy that transcends understanding.

Go, cremate your dead child's body now, then bathe and return to me. I will teach you the Mantropanishad. With that in your heart and meditating upon it, you will find the Lord Samkarshana in just seven nights. Worship the Lord Ananta and you will discover wisdom. The greatest Rishis found illumination by worshipping the Lord Sesha, and so shall you.'

Now Narada murmured a mantra, and the king and queen saw their dead child's spirit: alive and lambent! The Rishi spoke to that spirit, 'Prince, return to your body now. Look how your parents grieve for you, and you must be a king one day.'

The spirit said, 'In which life were these my mother and father, as I ranged the labyrinths of karma's births and rebirths? I have been animal and insect, fish and bird, god and human, demon and every other kind of being. We are all related to one another, are we not, O Muni, either as friends, kinsmen, enemies, or acquaintances?

A jiva wanders from birth to birth rather like a piece of gold does from hand to hand. Even during a long physical life every relationship is evanescent. O Narada, you are an enlightened one: you know that the jiva, the soul, is birthless, deathless, quite unrelated to whichever body it briefly animates. As long as the karma for a particular birth lasts so does that life last, and not a moment longer. The immortal Atman is part of Hari, and manifests as the universe by the gunas of the Lord's Maya.

The Atman is his own light. To him, no one is specially dear or hateful. He remains essentially detached. He has no father or mother, wife or child. He does not experience pleasure or pain; he neither sows nor reaps the fruit of karma. He is a witness to karma, untainted by deeds. Let me go now, O Munis, my karma here in this brief mortal life is served. Other lives call me, other tasks. Farewell.'

And the spirit that had been embodied briefly as Chitraketu's prince dissolved from before their eyes. The king and queen, all their relatives and retainers stood wonderstruck. That spirit bore no resemblance whatever to the little prince who had died. They saw what folly their grief had been. They ceased grieving. The king's kinsmen took away the dead prince's body and cremated it with every auspicious ritual.

Now the queens who had plotted to murder the child were filled with guilt. They confessed their sin, and Angiras and Narada told them to go to the banks of the sacred Yamuna where they initiated them into an elaborate ritual for expiating their crime. Having seen that spirit and heard what the brahmanas said, Chitraketu emerged from the deep and deceptive well of filial attachment, rather as a great elephant does from a quagmire.

He bathed in the Yamuna, poured offerings of water to the manes as the Maharishis told him to, restrained his grief, his senses and his mind, and came before Brahma's two sons. Solemnly, he bowed to them, and stood before them in silence, his hands folded worshipfully. Narada now taught him the Mantropanishad.

'AUM, we bow to you, Vasudeva of indescribable glory! We bow to your vuyhas, Pradyumna, Aniruddha and Samkarshana. We prostrate ourselves before you, who are pure and absolute knowledge, the embodiment of bliss, absorbed and content in yourself, perfectly peaceful at one with all things.

We salute you who are beyond the delusions of maya. We prostrate ourselves before Hrishikesa, master of the senses, whose body is the universe. Protect us, Lord, who are irradiant and singular; who are ineffable; who are pure consciousness, the cause of the very laws of causality, and who transcend these.

We bow to you, O Brahman, Absolute One, upon whom the universe is founded, from whom it evolves and into whom it dissolves. We worship You, who pervade the galaxies: who are to the universe what the earth is to everything born upon and of the earth. I worship you, O Brahman, who are ubiquitous, who pervade all things from without and within, even as the subtle akasa does. I worship you that are beyond the influence of the vital pranas, of the mind, the intellect, time and the senses.

I worship you O Parabrahman, O Pranava, who are the God of Gods, the immaculate AUM!'

Narada taught the king of Surasena this most ancient and sacred mantra, then Angiras and he vanished back to Brahmaloka, whence they had come. Thus began Chitraketu's initiation into the life of the spirit, the pursuit of moksha. The king sat in dhyana. For a week, he ate nothing but only drank water. Unceasingly, he chanted the mantra that Narada had taught him. At the end of seven days, he became a Vidyadhara by his penance. In some days more, his illumination grew and he arrived at the holy feet of the Lord Sesha, amsa of Narayana, Lord of Gods.

He saw Sesha white as a lotus. He wore unearthly blue silk, a shimmering crown, armlets, and a belt of gemstones and wristlets. His eyes reddish, surrounded by a multitude of siddhas, he radiated grace. The sight of Anatasesha consumed all Chitraketu's sins. He approached the Ancient One, with palms folded, silent. Bhakti surged in his heart, ecstasy, and tears flowed down his cheeks.

Chitraketu prostrated at the feet of the Lord Sesha. His tears dropped onto the altar above which those sacred feet rested. He was speechless for emotion. He could neither speak a word, nor give praise to the Lord. Finally, controlling himself, the kshatriya spoke, he sang a stotra, a hymn for Ananta.

'I worship you, O Sesha, who allow yourself to be conquered by your bhaktas that have conquered themselves, who then conquer them by your grace! I prostrate before you that give your own self as a gift to your devotees, whose minds are freed from desire. Lord of glory, this akhanda is your sport – its creation, nurture and destruction. All its creatures are your amsas, O Amsa of Narayana! Yet each of them thinks of himself as being a God and they vie with one another to rule: they whom death snatches away in a few years.

You are the father of atom and galaxy, yet you transcend both. You are immutable: the beginning and end of all things, who have no beginning or end yourself. The golden egg that is this universe is wrapped in seven sheaths: the earth and the other elements, each casing being ten times as great as the one it encases. There are millions upon millions of these in each universe. There are millions of such universes. Lord, all these together are like a single atom upon your head! So, we call you Ananta, Infinite One.

Lord, surely, they are brute beasts that worship Indra and the Devas to satisfy their desires and lusts, or for siddhis. For these end when the

Devas themselves are extinguished, even as the power of a king's loyalists perish when he dies. Yes, I have heard that you, too, grant worldly desires. But these, like rice grains once fried, do not sprout to entangle your bhaktas. The pairs of opposites are products of the gunas, and lead inevitably to death and rebirth. You, Lord, are beyond the gunas.

You, O Ananta, first preached the Bhagavata Dharma. Those that trod that path of light found moksha, the place beyond change. The greatest Munis like Sanatkumara, who have neither possessions nor desires, find eternal sanctuary in that dharma, which has no "I", "you", "me", "yours" or "mine". Violence, himsa of every kind, is rooted in these delusions, and so is hatred.

I see now that what Narada and Angiras said to me could never be untrue. The worst sinner shall be purified by just the sight of you. You are the Soul of the world, and its Guru. The creators of the universe are enlivened when you breathe, Lord. When you open your eyes the Devas live. I bow to you, Anantasesha, God of the thousand heads!'

Sesha seemed pleased with Chitraketu's hymn. The Lord in the form of an infinite serpent said, 'Verily, I am all created beings, the Atman and their support. I am the Veda and Brahman, and both these are my eternal form. Kshatriya, a man must understand that his own soul pervades the universe, and that the akhanda rests upon this Atman. When a man sleeps, deeper than the deepest dream, he sees the universe, identifies with the Atman and knows who he truly is. When he wakes, he finds himself isolated once more, in the world of maya, samsara's illusions and duality.

So, too, sleep and waking are conditions of the jiva: the illumination and ignorance of the spirit. What we call life is only illusions, a sleep or a dream for the soul, the Atman. The Paramatman, the Soul of the soul, is just a witness, actless and immaculate. When the jiva sleeps, in deep dream he identifies with that Soul, and I am that Brahman. O King, I am the limitless bliss beyond the ken of the gunas or the senses.

That bliss is absolute knowledge, consciousness untainted, when the jiva remembers again that he is not apart from me. Then his endless wandering through the mazes of samsara, its births and deaths, ceases. Kshatriya, a human birth is the most conducive one to pursue the path to enlightenment. If a jiva born as a human being does not in some measure tread the path towards his own soul, he will devolve to a bestial state. A wise man withdraws gradually from the way of karma. He leaves pravritti marga, the life of deeds, behind him, and sets foot firmly upon nivritti marga, the way of the recluse, the life of the renunciate.

There is no escape from sorrow by performing rituals, Chitraketu. You have seen that. You must convert your very life into a ritual, a yagna to discover your Atman, the Light of lights that lies buried in your own heart, the light that gives fire to galaxies, that is the seed and the end of Time. Only gradually does a man finally achieve this end, beyond which there is no other. The method of liberation, O King, is bhakti, devotion to me; there is no other. With bhakti, vairagya will certainly come to the devotee, and he will find communion, the unity of his individual spirit, his Atman, with the Universal Soul, the Paramatman. You can combine gyana, dhyana and bhakti to find your way out of samsara to the infinite field of moksha, to undying bliss.'

More than his words even, the Lord's voice entered Chitraketu's soul, soft, subtle, cosmic fire, and transformed him forever. As the king stood entranced, Anantasesha vanished before his eyes," said Suka, the entirely marvellous, to Parikshit.

THE CURSE OF PARVATI

SUKA DEVA CONTINUED, "BOWING DEEPLY IN THE DIRECTION THAT Anantasesha had vanished, Chitraketu, now a vidyadhara, went on his way through the sky. He now possessed great siddhis, the most wonderful powers. Siddhas and charanas called him a great yogi and he lived for a kalpa in the caves of Sumeru, where one's every desire is fulfilled merely by wishing for what one wants. He lived there, making the vidyadharis chant the Lord Hari's names and sing his praises.

Chitraketu had his own vimana, given to him by Vishnu, and one day when a kalpa had gone by after his vision of Anantasesha he was flying along in this splendid disk. He saw the pearl-like Kailasa and upon it the most extraordinary sight. He saw Lord Siva, surrounded by heavenly folk, siddhas, charanas, Rishis and others. The Devi Sati sat in Siva's lap, and Mahadeva caressed and fondled his consort, his hands upon her breasts. Moreover, they were conjoined below the waist, as well: *Aum mani padme hum.*

Chitraketu burst out laughing. He went nearer and said aloud, 'Look at this! Here is the Guru of the stars, the peerless Mahayogin, who expounds dharma to all the living. And here he sits shamelessly making love to his wife in a sabha of the greatest seers!'

And he laughed again. Lord Siva heard him and laughed himself; so did the others there, all the wise and unearthly ones, as if this was the finest joke they ever heard. But the Devi did not laugh. She frowned and her face grew dark.

Sati Devi said, 'So this is the great kshatriya Chitraketu! He dares presume to reprove Siva and me? Why, not Brahma himself, Vishnu, or the greatest brahmanas like Bhrigu and Narada, not Kapila or Sanatkumara dare question my husband. Yet this mere king of the earth, this vidyadhara, dares point his finger at Siva, who is the father of the worlds, whose feet the greatest Gods worship? Siva who is dharma incarnate!

Impudent fellow, you must pay for this. How dare you approach Vishnu's sacred feet, when you are ignorant as a fool and your heart is a demon's? I curse you Chitraketu! Go and be an Asura, so you never dare speak against the great again.'

Chitraketu alighted from his vimana, and, with folded hands, bowed to the Goddess. He said, 'I am happy to receive your curse, Mother of worlds. When you have cursed me, Devi, only good can accrue from your curse, and surely it is my destiny. Whirling helplessly upon the wheel of samsara, every creature wanders deluded experiencing pleasure and pain. Neither I nor anyone else is the cause of what I experience. Only the ignorant man thinks that he has caused his fortune or misfortune, his joy or sorrow.

Besides, O Mother, in this endless torrent of the gunas, where is the difference between pleasure and pain, and hence, between a blessing and a curse, between heaven and hell? Narayana creates every creature by his maya, and none escapes bondage and freedom. Only the Lord, the indweller upon whom all the rest is founded, is above these opposites, beyond birth and death. To him none is especially dear or hateful; no one is a friend or an enemy. He is Himself and equal everywhere, pervasive and always pure.

Devi, only whatever the Cause of all causes intends to happen, comes to pass. I will not ask you to withdraw your curse. Surely, there is a deep reason for whatever has happened here today, and I am glad to be cursed by one no less than the Mother of the stars. And if I have insulted you, Devi, or wounded your feelings in the least, I beg you to forgive me.'

A radiant and smiling Chitraketu prostrated at the feet of Siva and Sati, then climbed back into his vimana and flew on. Sati looked amazed, as did Siva's ganas and the assembly of the great and the wise upon Kailasa.

Siva laughed softly, then said, 'Sati, now you see how noble the bhaktas of Hari are! How without desire they are, how free from fear. Chitraketu is so calm because he has Vishnu's blessing upon him, in his heart. A true Vishnubhakta fears no one; for him swarga, moksha and even the narakas are the same. He sees the same immanent Reality in them all, and the same Blue God that he adores.

By the Lord's lila, his divine sport, the Soul enters a body and experiences life and death, pleasure and pain, grace and accursedness. All these are equal, and only ignorance of his true nature makes the man, the jiva, desire one and abhor the other. To those that are Narayana's true bhaktas, those who by his grace have spiritual power and renunciation – for them, there is nothing left to seek, nothing worth possessing.

Not Brahma, Sanatkumara, Narada or any of the Brahmaputras, not the other Munis fathom his intentions. He is inscrutable. The Devas know little of his deep designs, though they are sovereigns in their own right. Hari has no favourites, but he always helps his bhaktas. He is the antaryamin in everyone; every soul is as close to him and as beloved as every other.

Chitraketu is a great bhakta and has Vishnu's blessing, Sati. He, too, looks upon all beings as equal and as parts of himself. His heart is calm, as calm as mine. He sees the lila of the Paramatman everywhere, in a blessing and in your curse. He would as happily be an Asura as a vidyadhara.'

Sati grew calm herself. Chitraketu, who had the power of Vishnu and could have cursed even the Devi back, had merely smiled and bowed to her, before flying off on his way. Of course, the Goddess' curse could not but come to pass, and Chitraketu, the vidyadhara, was born in Tvashtar's dakshinagni as Vritrasura to avenge his brother Viswarupa.

Parikshit, be certain this is no idle tale, but a sacred legend that severs the bonds of karma in the heart of him that hears it," said Suka to the king.

THE BIRTH OF THE MARUTS

SUKA DEVA CONTINUED, "SAVITUR WAS THE FIFTH SON OF ADITI. HIS wife Prishni gave birth to three daughters: Savitri, who is the Goddess of the Gayatri mantra; Vyahriti, who rules the three mystical syllables *bhoor, bhuvah and svar*; and Trayi, who rules over the three Vedas.

Prishni also had nine sons: Agnihotra, the God who presides over the havis, the burnt offerings given into the Fire; Pashu, who is the lord of animal sacrifices; Soma who rules the Soma yagnas; Chaturmaasya, who rules the three sacrifices performed before the three seasons, summer, the monsoon and winter, begin.

Her other five sons were the deities of the five great yagnas, the Mahamakha. The first is the Brahmayagna, at which the holiest Rishis are worshipped, with the chanting of the Vedas. The second is the Pitrayagna, at which the ancestors are worshipped, with tarpana. The third is the Devayagna, at which the Devas are worshipped, with homa and the utterance of their names. The fourth is the Bhutayagna, at which a portion of our food is offered to the spirits, to acknowledge man's constant debt to them. The fifth is Narayagna, at which we worship our fellow men, and give food and shelter for a night to a travelling stranger.

Aditi's sixth son, Bhaga, married Siddhi. She gave him three sons, Mahiman, Vibhu and Prabhu, and an exquisite daughter called Aasis.

Aditi's seventh son, Dhatr, married four wives: Kuhu, the goddess of the last night of the dark fortnight of the moon; Sinivali, she that rules the fourteenth night; Raka who reigns over the last night of the bright fortnight of the waxing moon; and Anumati, who rules the last bright night. These bore Sayam, the evening; Darsha, who rules the last day of the dark fortnight; Pratar, god of the morning; and Purnamasa, ruler of the last day of the bright fortnight.

Aditi's eighth son, Samanantara, married Kriya and she bore him the five fire deities known as the Purisyas.

Aditi's ninth son was Varuna, who is the Lord of water. His queen was Charsani, and she bore him Brahma's mind son Bhrigu, in a corporeal form. Valmiki was also Varuna's son, and a great Yogi. They say he was born from an anthill, a valmikam. The Rishis Agastya and Vasishta were born from a jar, into which the Devas Mitra and Varuna ejaculated their seed, when they were with the Apsara Urvashi.

Mitra was Mother Aditi's tenth son. He married Revati and begot three sons upon her – Utsarga, Arishta and Pippala.

Aditi's eleventh son was the king of the Devas, Indra. He married Puloma's daughter Sachi and fathered three sons on her – Jayatna, Rishabha and Midhusha.

Her twelfth son was Urukrama, who was the Lord Vishnu himself, who appeared as a Vamana, a Dwarf, with his divine maya. He sired on his wife Kirti a son named Bhrihachchaloka, who then fathered Saubhaga and other sons, too. The Vamana's life and deeds I shall speak of later, in detail.

These were Kashyapa's sons by his pure wife Aditi. Listen now, O Kshatriya, to the names of the sons he sired on Aditi's sister Diti. In that bloodline, also, were born the noblest Asuras, who became the most ardent Vishnubhaktas – Bali and Prahlada.

Diti had two sons Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu; both became masters of the stars and of the three worlds. Both Vishnu slew, when he incarnated as the Varaha and the Narasimha.

Hiranyakashyapu's wife was Jambha's daughter, a Danavi called Kayadhu. She gave birth to four sons, Samhrada, Anuhrada, Hrada and Prahlada. She also had a daughter called Simhika. Simhika had a son by

Viprachitti called Rahu – whom Vishnu decapitated with his Sudarshana Chakra during the drinking of the amrita.

Samhrada's wife Kriti bore him Panchajana. Hrada's wife Dhamani gave birth to Vatapi and Ilvala, whom, after they made macabre meals of many a brahmana, Agastya finally killed. Anuhrada married Soormya, and she bore him Baskala and Mahisha. Prahlada's son was Virochana. Virochana's wife was Devi, and their son was the incomparable Bali.

Bali married Ashana, and sired a hundred sons upon her, the eldest being Bana. Bana worshipped Siva with an unremitting tapasya and became one of the Lord's foremost bhaktas. Why, they say that Rudra always stood at Banasura's side, that he still stands guard at the gates of that Asura's city.

Diti also had sons called the Maruts, forty-nine of them. None of them had any children and Indra took them to live among his Devas, as companions to Vayu the Wind."

Parikshit asked, "They were of Diti's race and Asuras, O Suka. How did Indra make Devas of the Maruts? What did they do for him that he made them gods?"

Suka replied, "Vishnu slew Diti's sons Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu. She knew that Vishnu had done this at the instance of Indra, whose side he always took against the race of Asuras, her sons and Danu's. She wanted revenge against her sister Aditi's son. Night after night, she would lie sleepless in her bed and tell herself, 'I shall never sleep in peace again, until I have that cruel, sensual, merciless Indra killed.' But who could kill the king of the Devas? Diti wondered how she could have a son mighty enough to accomplish her consuming desire, her obsession.

Subtly she began to enchant her husband, Kashyapa Muni – with intimate attentions, with her modesty, restraint, serving him night and day with bhakti, and with sweet seductiveness, too. Diti made herself irresistible and Kashyapa succumbed to her. When they lay together one night, in love's languor, she told him that she wanted a boon for herself and he should not refuse what she asked, whatever it was. He gave her his word, thinking she would ask for some trifle, after all she was sweetness personified these days.

Kashyapa said happily, 'I will give you anything you want, even as Vishnu does Lakshmi! Ask and it shall be yours.'

She said softly, 'Give me an immortal son who will kill Indra, for Indra has killed my sons.'

Kashyapa recoiled from her as if he had been stung by a scorpion. He thought, 'Ah, today I have fallen into an abyss, for I let my truth be seduced by a woman's charms. The fault is not hers – she is only following her nature. I have allowed mine to be subverted. Who can fathom the motives of a woman? Her face is as sweet and soft as an autumn lotus in bloom; her words are like amrita to the ear; but her heart is sharp as razors.

A self-seeking woman loves no one. To get what she wants she will gladly kill her husband, brother or even her son. But I have sworn to give Diti a son, and I must keep my word. Yet, Indra does not deserve killing.'

Suddenly, Marichi's son Kashyapa saw a way out of his predicament. He said to Diti, 'I grant you the boon you want.'

She embraced him with a joyous cry, but now he added, 'Yet there can be no boon without its condition, especially not one like this. You must keep a vrata, a perfect vow, for a year. If you do, you shall indeed have a son to kill Indra. If you make the least lapse in your vow, you shall still have a son, but then he will become a friend of the Devas.'

Diti replied unhesitatingly, 'I will keep the vrata. Tell me what I must do.'

Kashyapa said, 'You must not injure any living thing. You must not curse or tell a lie. You will not clip your nails or cut your hair. You will not touch anything that is in the least impure. You shall not bathe by immersing yourself in water. You shall not speak to the evil-minded or ever lose your temper. You will not wear unwashed clothes or a garland that anyone else has worn.

You will not eat leavings, nor food offered to Bhadrakali, the seven Matrikas, or food on which ants have fed. You will eat no meat or any food brought you by a sudra. You will not eat food upon which a menstruating woman sets eyes. You shall not drink water with cupped palms, never go out with any food in your mouth, or without rinsing your mouth with water first. You shall never go out in the evening with your hair untied, without ornaments or your upper garment.

Your speech must be restrained and quiet at all times. You must always wash your feet before going to bed, and they must be wiped dry. You must never sleep with your head facing north or west. You must not sleep with anyone near you, nor without clothes. You must be awake at dawn and at dusk.

Wearing freshly washed clothes you must worship the Lord Vishnu, the Devi Lakshmi, sacred cows, and brahmanas, before you eat breakfast. You must honour married women, whose husbands are alive, by offering them garlands, sandalwood paste, food and ornaments. You must worship your husband, wait upon him, make love with him and find in your dhyana that his tejas, his vital energy, is in your womb.

Diti, this is the Pumsavana vrata, and if you keep it perfectly for a year, you will surely have a son who will kill Indra.'

Diti agreed readily, and soon she conceived. Now, she began to keep the Pumsavana vrata. Meanwhile, Indra heard about his aunt's intention, and her vow. She moved into a solitary asrama. Indra came to wait on his aunt in that hermitage. Daily, he brought her fruit, flowers, arani twigs, kusa grass, leaves, green shoots, earth and water from the forest for her worship. She did not know that he had heard the reason for her year's vrata. She felt flattered; she was touched that he served her so lovingly. Then, she would remember her dead sons and harden her heart again.

Indra waited on Diti like a hunter disguised as a deer, never giving any sign of what he intended. He waited for her to make the slightest slip. For months, she was immaculate in the observance of her vow. Still Indra waited and his alarm and anxiety, of which he showed nothing, grew.

At last, one evening late in the eleventh month, exhausted by her heavy pregnancy and by the extreme demands of her vow, Diti fell asleep before dusk, without rinsing her mouth after she had eaten. Indra saw his chance and, master of yoga that he was, seized it. Seeing the gap in the kavacha of her vow, Indra magicked himself subtly into her womb, while she slept, and with his Vajra cut the tremendous and radiant golden foetus that lay there like some mystic treasure, in seven pieces.

The seven folded their little hands to him and cried, 'We are your brothers, don't kill us!'

Indra only cast his thunderbolt at them again, savagely, hissing, 'Maa ruda! Maa ruda!' which meant 'Don't cry!' Even when they were truncated in forty-nine pieces, the foetuses did not die. They became forty-nine separate foetuses. Even as Krishna's grace saved you from Aswatthama's brahmasirsa, O Parikshit, while you were in your mother Uttaraa's womb, Hari's grace saved the embryos in Diti's womb. They did not die.

With Indra, the brilliant Maruts numbered fifty gods. Indra set aside the ancient and exclusive convention of maternal heredity and made the Maruts drinkers of Somarasa. He made them Devas.

When Diti awoke from her twilight slumber, she saw her sons shining like fire beside Indra. Now, all she felt was elation. She said, 'I kept the Pumasavana vrata to have a child who would strike terror in the hearts of Aditi's sons. But I see seven times seven sons. Indra, nephew, tell me what happened. I beg you, don't lie to me.'

Indra confessed, 'Mother Diti, I learnt what your vrata was for, and came to serve you. I watched my chance, the least flaw in your Pumsavana. When I saw a gap in the vow, I flew into your womb and cut your foetus in seven, then cut the seven in seven, each, again. Yet they did not die.

I saw this miracle and realised this must be Vishnu's grace and his intention: that your sons lived. I beg you, forgive me, O my aunt. Your child is alive, albeit as forty-nine children.'

As Indra stood before her, with palms joined, Diti was silent for a long moment. Somehow, she found the hatred had quite evaporated from her heart. Slowly, she said, 'Fate willed the lapse in my vrata. It was Narayana's will and not my weakness that made me err today. Yet, my child was also given immortality by his father's blessing. What mother could ask for more, than that her son survived Indra's Vajra? You were not meant to die Indra.

I have forty-nine sons instead of one; take them with you, as their father foretold, and let them be Devas beside you. Let them be like your own brothers from this day.'

Indra stood with his head bowed, terrified lest she curse him. Diti sighed, 'The will of Narayana can never be thwarted. Though they were born of Diti, let my sons be companions of Aditi's son.'

Indra seemed pleased and relieved. He said, 'They shall be called the Maruts for what I said to them in their mother's womb when they cried. Let them be the companions of Vayu.'

And he took them to Devaloka with him," said Suka to the king.

Parikshit wanted to know, "What was the Pumsavana vrata that Kashyapa asked Diti to keep? Tell me about it in some detail, Muni."

Suka said, "A woman begins the vrata with her husband's consent, on the first day of the bright half of Margasirsa. The Pumsavana confers her every desire on she that keeps it. The woman must listen to the legend of the birth of the Maruts; she should hear other wisdom from brahmanas. She cleans her teeth, until they sparkle, bathes, then puts on two pure white garments. She puts on ornaments and worships the Lord Vishnu and his Devi Sri in the morning, before she breaks the night's fast.

Here is the prayer with which she invokes Hari. *I bow to you, O Lord, who are beyond all desires. I bow to the master of Lakshmi, lord of all the siddhis, sovereign of the worlds.*

I bow to you Devi Mahamaaye, who have all the qualities of your Lord. Bless me, O Almighty Goddess. Mother of the universe, I bow to you.

I worship the Lord Narayana, who is the sacred ***AUM****, Pranavaswarupa.*

The woman that has taken the vrata worships an image of the Lord. Her mind restrained with dhyana, she offers Him water to wash his feet and rinse his mouth, offers him padya and arghya, garments of yellow silk, a sacred thread, ornaments, sandal-paste, flowers, incense, light, food and other offerings.

From the food left over from the offering to Vishnu, twelve oblations are given to the sacred fire, with the mantra for Hari and Lakshmi, who confer every worldly desire. The bhakta then prostrates herself, stiff as a stick, on the ground before the God and his consort. She offers the mantra ten times and sings the hymn: *Both of you are the rulers of the universe, the ultimate causes of the world. This world is your maya, too subtle to unravel. You are the embodiment of all the yagnas of creation; she is their performance.*

You are the Atman, she Prakriti. She is the gunas manifested, you are the manifestation's cause. You are the Soul, the inner Control; she is the body, the senses and the inner organ. Glorious Lakshmi is the form and the name; you are their support and illuminator.

O Supreme Rulers of the universe, I beg you, let my wishes come true!

After giving praise, the woman removes the offerings. Again she offers sacred water to the Deities for achamana, to rinse their mouths after partaking of her offerings, and continues her worship, now called uttara puja.

Again she sings the hymn above, giving praise. She devoutly sniffs the remnants of the havis, the burnt offerings, and worships Hari once more. In her heart she identifies her husband with Vishnu and serves him, making various offerings that please him. He, too, assists her lovingly in keeping her vrata, and in every aspect, great and small, of her worship. In fact, either the husband or the wife may keep the Pumsavana vrata. If the woman is incapacitated, from illhealth, her husband can keep the vow.

However, once the vrata is begun, it should not be broken for any reason. The woman invokes Narayana and Sri, by offering garlands and sandal-paste, food and jewellery. Then she asks them to return to their abode and eats what she offered – to purify herself and to get whatever she undertook the vrata for.

The woman observes the Pumsavana vrata for twelve months, then fasts on the last day and night of the month of Karttika. At dawn, she bathes and worships the Lord Krishna. Her husband offers twelve oblations, as prescribed in the Parvana Sthali Paka Vidhana, of rice cooked in milk and mixed with ghee in the sacrificial fire. She takes the blessings of the brahmanas that sit over the yagna and only then eats.

Her husband first feeds his Guru and his relatives, with his speech controlled, and then gives whatever is left of the charu, which bestows fortune and children, to his wife.

There is no doubt that the man who keeps the Pumsavana vrata of the Lord Hari gets whatever his heart desires. The woman who keeps the vrata is blessed with fortune, wealth, children, a long life for her husband, honour and a fine home. The unmarried girl who keeps the vrata finds an excellent husband; the widow that does, is freed of her sins and finds moksha; the misfortunate woman finds lasting fortune; the ugly woman finds radiance and miraculous beauty; a sick person becomes healthy and virile. The Pumsavana vrata also brings deep satisfaction to the Pitrs and the Devas.

If Agni Deva, Vishnu and Sri Mahalakshmi are pleased upon the completion of the homa, they confer whatever the sacrificer wanted," Suka Deva concluded his description of the Pumsavana vrata, which once Diti kept, when she bore the Devas known as the Maruts, the companions of Vayu the Wind.

Skandha 7

THE LORD IS NOT PARTIAL

IN THE NAIMISA VANA SUTA UGRASRAVAS SAYS, 'PARIKSHIT ASKED, "THE Lord is meant to be perfectly impartial. Then why did he take Indra's side against the Asuras? He had nothing to fear from the demons, and he is beyond the gunas of prakriti; but he seemed always to take Indra's part."

Suka said, "I bow to my father, the incomparable Vyasa, before I answer you. And my reply shall dwell upon the greatness not just of the Lord, but his bhaktas, like the matchless Prahlada.

It is true indeed that Vishnu is Un-born, immortal and beyond the gunas. He is passionless and perfectly impartial. Yet he himself assumes the forms and roles of good and evil, darkness and light, attacker and the attacked, in his divine lila, his cosmic play.

Sattva, rajas and tamas are of Prakriti, not the Atman. They hold no sway over the Lord, to whom all three belong. At different times, in different ages, one guna dominates the others. When sattva rules, Narayana takes the part of the Devas and the Rishis; when rajas rules, he is with the Asuras, and during the ages of tamas, he is with the yakshas and rakshasas.

As the sun is reflected in water, as the fire appears in fuel, but is distinct from what burns, God transcends Prakriti. He is reflected in nature's gunas, and consumes the events of time as fire does fuel, remaining unaffected himself. Only the illumined can see the Lord in his pure unmanifested and timeless form; the rest behold him only as he is reflected in nature and time. The enlightened ones churn their very beings with the rod of discrimination, and finally discover the eternal Spirit dwelling within them. They are freed from birth and death; they become like Narayana himself.

Bhagavan is the master of the gunas, not they of him. When he wants to create, and for jivas to reap the fruit of their karma, he causes rajas to dominate; when he wants to nurture creation and bring delight to the worlds by playful manifestations, he stokes sattva; and when he sleeps, he lets dark tamas rule.

So, O Rajan, it is at the times when Vishnu supports the sattva guna that he appears to blindly side with the forces of light, the Devas and their interests, and to suppress the Asuras and rakshasas and the beings of night and darkness. But remember, Parikshit, that the ages of darkness, when one great Demon or other rules, are as numerous as those of light.

When once, during his Rajasuya yagna, the noble Yudhishtira saw how the base Sishupala's soul was absorbed into Krishna, when Krishna killed that demonic king, your ancestor asked Narada Muni in surprise, 'Swami, how did this evil one gain union with the Lord, when such union is all but impossible for even the greatest Rishis and bhaktas? Vena, who merely insulted the Lord, was sent to purgatory, but Sishupala, who did far worse and deserved to find naraka for himself, has found moksha instead! So, too, Dantavakra. They have always cursed Krishna in the vilest way, since they lisped their first words as infants. Ah, Narada, all of us are dumbfounded.'

Narada seemed pleased by the question and replied happily, 'Being embodied is a consequence of being unable to distinguish between Purusha and Prakriti, spirit and matter. Having a body serves to experience the fruit of karma, good and bad: to know pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, praise and insult. Embodied beings experience agony when pain or shame is inflicted upon them. They feel terror, which often exceeds death itself, when threatened with death. All this is because of the illusion of identifying with the body.

The Paramatman, the supreme Soul, who transcends material nature, can never have any special identification with any individual being: It is universal, the same to all. Can such a One be called cruel or violent, when he upholds karma and metes out punishment to purify a jiva of his sins? He is immaculate beyond any imperfection of judgement, any favour.

All that matters, Kshatriya, is to fix one's mind on Him – regardless of whether in love or hatred, fear or adoration, lust or any passion at all. Through any of these one constantly remembers the Lord. Why, to my mind, the common bhakti of love is lesser than the fervour of hating God! The worm that the wasp glues to the mould on the wall, and constantly remembers the wasp in terror and rage: why, that worm becomes the wasp!

Sishupala and Dantavakra were obsessed by their hatred of Krishna. He was always in their minds and they wanted to destroy him more than anything. Not just they, but so many others have been purified and attained Him because they were burnt pure of their sins by their obsession – whether in love, anger, hatred, lust or terror. The gopikas attained Krishna by lust, Kamsa by fear, Sishupala and the other demon kings by hatred, the Yadavas by kinship, you Pandavas through your affection for him, and we Rishis by our bhakti. The ways are different, Yudhishtira, but they all lead to the same place.

As for Vena, his feelings do not fall within these five relationships. He was a common sceptic, self-absorbed, deluded; in no way whatever was his mind fixated upon God. Incidentally, you should know that your cousins Sishupala and Dantavakra are in truth Mahavishnu's dwarapalakas in Vaikunta! They were arrogant and fell from grace because some Rishis once cursed them.'

Yudhishtira asked, 'Which Sages cursed Vishnu's dwarapalakas? I find it hard to believe that such bhaktas, so near the Lord, can be cursed to become involved with samsara. O Narada, those that dwell in Vaikuntha have no body, no senses, no prana even. How are they born as gross flesh?'

Narada answered, 'Once, on their great journeys through the cosmos, Brahma's sons Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatana and Sanatkumara arrived in Vaikuntha. They, who were older than the stars, looked like children, five or six years old. They were clad in the wind; they wore no clothes. Vishnu's dwarapalakas Jaya and Vijaya took them for mere children and would not let them into their Master's presence.

In anger, the Sages cursed those gatekeepers, "You are full of darkness and have no right to stay here in this realm of sattva. Be born in the world of rajas and tamas, be born into the race of Asuras!"

Then, seeing Jaya and Vijaya stricken, the Rishis mitigated their curse: "Be born into the world of men for three births as Demons, and then our curse shall end and you shall return to Vaikuntha for ever."

Jaya and Vijaya were born first as Asuras in the womb of Diti. The older one was called Hiranyaksha and the younger Hiranyakashyapu. They ruled the race into which they were born, for awesome was their power and their glory, not least because of who they actually were.

As you know, Yudhishtira, Vishnu came as the Narasimha to kill Hiranyakashyapu of the great boon, and Hiranyaksha he killed when he came as the Varaha to lift Bhumi Devi out of Patala, where she lay submerged beneath the sea.

But I want to tell you about Hiranyakashyapu's son Prahlada. Though he was born into the race of Asuras, from his earliest years Prahlada was a Vishnubhakta: an unequalled one. His father, who, by the Rishis' ancient curse, was born hating Vishnu, did his utmost to crush Prahlada's bhakti and then to kill the boy, his son, by diverse means. Prahlada, by his worship, had realised the Parabrahman; he was united with the universal Soul.

This was Jaya and Vijaya's first demonic birth, as the Asuras Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu, the sons of Diti. In their second birth, in the next yuga, they were born as Rakshasas, the sons of the Rishi Visravas and his wife Keshini. They were called Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and became the terrors of the earth for an age. Now, Narayana was born as Rama of Ayodhya in the House of Raghu, and he killed them again himself, as he had sworn when the sons of Brahma first cursed Jaya and Vijaya.

In this age, Jaya and Vijaya came again as Sishupala and Dantavakra, your cousins, in the last birth of the three to which they were cursed. And Vishnu has again set them free from the bondage of flesh: Vishnu in his Krishna Avatara. Dying by his Sudarshana Chakra, they have been finally purified of their old sin and the Munis' curse. They have been united again with their Lord, and have returned to immortal Vaikuntha.'

A surprised Yudhishtira wanted to know, 'O Narada, will you tell me how a great Asura like Hiranyakashyapu hated his own son so much that he tried to have him killed? More than any other race, the Demons love their own blood. This is passing strange, Muni,' " said Suka.

DITI CONSOLED

VYASA'S ILLUMINED SON CONTINUED, "NARADA SAID TO THE PANDAVA emperor, your grand-uncle, 'Hiranyakashyapu was furious when he heard that Vishnu, as the Varaha, had killed his brother Hiranyaksha, who had been as dear to him as his very prana. The Demon was as grief-stricken as he was enraged. He bit his lips, till they bled; he trembled, glared up at the smoky sky, his eyes glittering, his great fangs flashing at the corners of his mouth.

Hiranyakashyapu raised his trisula high and roared to his mightiest Danavas in a voice like thunder among the stars, 'Dvimurdha! Tyaksha! Sambara! Shatabahu! Hayagriva! Namuchi! Paka! Ilavala! Vipracitti! Puloma! Shakuni!' Each name reverberated across earth and sky.

'All the rest of you Daityas and Danavas, my heroes all! Hear me clearly and do at once as I tell you. It is our craven, vainglorious cousins, the Devas, who caused my precious brother's death. Vishnu himself is not partial, but the cowards of light have won him over with their fawning and cringing, and their incessant prayers.'

He snorted like another clap of thunder. 'We hear that Vishnu is the Lord of all things, the master of Creation. Yet, he is like a fickle child, who favours those that sing his praises. He abandons his natural and refulgent form, and, for these cowards of Indra, takes the shape of a pig! He uses some low wizardry to achieve this.'

He paused again, shaking in every limb, tears flowing free down his great and wild face. Then, he threw back his head and cried, 'My sorrow will not be still until I offer my dead brother tarpana with this Vishnu's blood that I spill from his throat with my trisula. When deceitful Vishnu dies, the Devas will also die, like a tree whose roots have been cut.

But first, we must become strong, for this Hari is not an ordinary foe. Go down to the earth, my warriors. Her prosperity depends upon the brahmanas and kshatriyas who rule her. Bhumi thrives by their tapasya, their yagnas, their vratas, their chanting and study of the Vedas, and their charity. All this is the basis of Vishnu's power, especially the rituals that the brahmanas of the earth perform. Why, he is dharma's very form and yagna embodied. He is the sanctuary of the Devas, the Gandharvas, the Rishis, the Pitrs, the final goal of all the good.

I say to you, Asuras, fly down to the earth and wherever you find any holy sacrifice being performed by a brahmana or kshatriya, or any Rishi that sits in tapasya – kill them! Kill them all; kill their sacred cows. Take fire to their cities, towns and villages; raze their asramas, eat their flesh, and drink their blood. Why, the trees and plants of the earth grow green and stand in worship of Vishnu. Cut them all down; burn the green earth, until it is charred black. Go now!'

Legions of Asuras swept across the earth in a sinister tide of bloody mayhem. They brought fire to town and village, to cowherd settlements. They laid waste garden and forest, field, orchard and the asramas of Rishis. They razed city and palace, burnt down pristine forest, with great trees that had stood in profound dhyana since the world began.

Other fell demon armies flew into Devaloka, Indra's realm, bringing occult and terrible fires with them. They brought such terror to the cities of the gods of light, that Indra and all his people fled down to the earth and wandered a ruined Bhumi disguised as beggarly men.

Having sent his savage forces across the worlds to begin his great revenge for his brother's slaying, Hiranyakashyapu, now emperor of the Asuras, sadly performed the last rites for Hiranyaksha. He comforted his brother's sons Sakuni, Sambara, Bhutasantapana, Vrika, Kalanabha, Mahanabha, Harismasru and Utkacha. He consoled Hiranyaksha's widow Rushabhanu and his own mother Diti.

As so many great Asura kings before and after him, after the death of a great sovereign in war, the new king Hiranyakashyapu said, 'O my mother, my sister, nephews, death in a great battle like the one my brother fought brings no shame but eternal honour and fame! It has been said since the world began that one must not grieve for such a warrior. Hiranyaksha has found immortality. This brief life is like a caravanserai, with jivas gathering here and quickly leaving on other journeys. Only the Atman is eternal, changeless, pervasive and omniscient.

When the wind stirs the water in a pool, the reflections of the trees in it move, even as if the trees themselves were moving. The very earth seems to sway and shake in a disturbed reflection. Like the wind does water, the gunas of prakriti stir the mind, so the immaculate Purusha seems to be one with that mind, as the trees' reflections in water. Then the Paramatman, which is perfectly spiritual, sukshma, appears even to be embodied.

This is an illusion, and it is this illusion that makes us feel attachment for people and objects dear to us, and revulsion for those we dislike. Then there is also the bondage of karma and the embroilment in samsara: the cycle of births and deaths and everything these bring – the joys and sorrows, the ignorance that cannot discern between the Atman and the body, obsession with material things, and the end of true discrimination and judgement about the nature of reality and ourselves."

Hiranyakashyapu paused. He seemed calm now, perhaps that he had begun to avenge his brother or possibly he controlled himself to comfort his mother, his brother's widow and children. Yet there is no doubt that much of what he said was the deepest wisdom.

Slowly, in his sonorous voice, the matchless Demon continued, "Let me tell you an old story about a conversation between Yama and the relatives of a dead man. Once, in the kingdom of Usinara, the majestic king Suyajna ruled, until one day he was slain in battle by an enemy army. His family came and gathered round his mangled and bloody corpse. They saw his jewel-studded armour shattered, and his heart pierced clean through by a long thick arrow. His face and body were covered in dirt and dust; his ornaments and the garlands round his neck were all askew; his hair was dishevelled and knotted with blood; his teeth had bitten through his lower lip in the final rage of death; his eyes had been gouged out of their sockets; and his arms, whose ringed hands still clutched a sword and a dagger, had been cut off at the shoulders.

Seeing their lord in that horrible state, his wives fell on the ground around his body, beat their breasts, tore their hair and set up a bewailing. 'We are undone!' they cried again and again.

They bathed his feet in tears, that ran scarlet with the saffron powder on their breasts, crying, 'Lord of our lives, pitiless Brahma has snatched you from us. Once you spread joy and harmony throughout this kingdom, now all Usinara weeps. How kind you were to us, Suyajna, how loving and tender. How passionate you were; ah, how shall we live without you? Husband, we beg you, let us also come wherever you have gone and be with you again, we care not where it is.'

They fell across his magnificent and ruined body and held him in their arms until the sun set over the ghastly field. When some royal servitors and Rishis of the palace wanted to take Suyajna's corpse to cremate him, the women would not allow them to come near the dead king. Near midnight, the women's grief showed no sign of abating; indeed their sobs were more piteous than ever. Yama came to them in the guise of a little boy.

The God Death said, 'How marvellously ignorant you women are! Yet you are much older than I am, and must know the ways of the world far better than I can. But surely, this is futile and comic: that one who has returned to the unknown home from where he first came is being lamented so loudly by those that will themselves quite soon follow him out of this world!

I believe I am rather fortunate myself. For though I have been abandoned by my parents, I feel no anxiety, nor sorrow. I am small and weak, yet I have not been devoured by wolves. I am certain that He that protects us in our mother's wombs watches over us always. The Paramatman creates, sustains and destroys this universe, all life in it. Sweet ladies, whatever you see and everything that is hidden from you as well is only God's divine sport, his lila. He is the one that gives life and death.

What falls by the way on a road is sometimes recovered if He so wills, while what is carefully locked away inside a home can go missing, if that is what He intends. This is the only truth; the rest is illusion. A man protected by God can live safely in a jungle teeming with predators; while one that He decides must die shall meet death even if he is behind safely locked doors in his home.

It is the karma that clings to the linga sarira, the spirit body, of jivas that causes them to be born, to live and die: all at a preordained time. In each birth, their bodies assume the nature of the species they are born into, but the Atman remains always separate and unaffected by these corporeal qualities: even as a house one dwells in remains separate from him that lives in it. Finally the body, the house, will dissolve into its constituent elements and be no more. As the fire in fuel, air in the body and the ubiquitous akasic ether in all things remain apart from the objects they pervade, so the Atman remains distinct from all the illusions, the garments of Prakriti, which the Soul evanescently inhabits.

Ladies, I fear you are being foolish. For sure, the jiva you knew as Suyajna appears to be lying before you, lifeless. Yet when he was with you, spoke to you, ate and sat and walked with you, it was only his body that you heard, saw and touched, not his spirit. That body is still here before you. When the Atman associates itself with the karmic linga sarira, then he is mantled by ignorance. All this sorrow and suffering is only a delusion caused by that dark veil of maya. It is no more real than a dream or a palace you seem to see in the air. The senses and their objects are all unreal, mirages.

Only the Self, the Atman is eternal. It is never born, as you think, nor does it live or die. It always was and it is eternal, changeless. So, the wise never grieve for the eternal Soul, or for the fleeting body. Also, dear women, can you change anything by your grief? Can you fetch Suyajna's spirit back from death to inhabit his body again?'

By now, the women had stopped wailing, and only sobbed softly now and again. The extraordinary boy held them in the spell of his words, and his presence. He continued in his soft voice, 'A hunter, a vetala, was used to spreading his net in the forest and every day he snared birds in it. One day, two kulinga birds were feeding among the trees, when the female bird was caught in the hunter's net. The male saw her enmeshed, and he was helpless to free her. She screamed in terror. Beside himself with grief and panic, her mate hopped and flew round her crying, "Fate is cruel! Fate is savage! What does fate gain by killing my mate? Oh, let Yama take me as well. Why should I live on, when she is dead. It is like living with one's body cut in half. Ah, how will I raise our fledglings on my own? Even now they must be waiting for their mother to come and feed them."

The hunter dozed hidden in the nearby undergrowth. He heard the cries of the male bird, woke up and shot it with an arrow. So it is with you women: it is futile mourning the dead, when your own deaths stalk you nearer every moment of your lives.'"

Hiranyakashyapu paused a moment and saw his words were having the desired effect upon his own mourning family. The great Asura continued, "Suyajna's wives were taken aback to hear what the boy said, and even more by the uncanny authority with which he spoke. He seemed to speak straight into their hearts, and they understood the boy, as they would not have anyone else. Suddenly, their grief evaporated like mist before the sun: they saw how absurd it was, they saw the true nature of their own lives. Why, most of them laughed aloud in joy at the new awareness that dawned over them, and in relief at seeing the truth.

The women rose away from the body of their dead lord, and allowed it to be borne away for the last rites and cremation. So, my mother, my sister, my sons, all this life is a passing pageant in death's halls. And who knows who is one's own? Who knows which is the true self and which is not?"

Great was that Daitya's conviction, and Diti and the others were consoled by what he said. Like the women of Suyajna, they also stopped grieving,' said Narada," Suka said.

HIRANYAKASHYAPU’S TAPASYA

“NARADA WENT ON WITH HIS TALE TO YOUR GRANDSIRE.

‘Yudhishtira, Hiranyakashyapu wanted to make himself invincible. He wanted that age never touch him, nor death approach him, and he wanted to be sovereign of the three worlds forever. He went to a valley tucked in the Mandara mountain, and performed a tapasya such as the worlds had never seen, so harsh was it. He stood on his toes, with his arms raised over his head and his face turned up to the sky. He stood motionless, and his hair grew down below his shoulders in jata and, in time, it shone with his penance like the sun when the world is dissolved in the pralaya.

When Hiranyakashyapu began his tapasya, the Devas, whom he had driven from Devaloka, returned to their homes. But subtle spirit fire from the Demon’s penance began to scorch the three worlds, above and below him and all around the motionless Asura. Rivers and seas swelled in turbulence. Wild winds howled everywhere. The earth shook with great tremors. Comets and meteors fell blazing out of the sky; why, it seemed the stars and planets were dislodged from their proper places and orbits. The ten directions seemed to be on fire.

The fire of Hiranyakashyapu’s tapasya flamed up into Devlaoka and the Devas fled to Brahma’s higher realm. Indra cried to the four-headed God, “Lord of lords, protector of worlds! We cannot stay in our heaven for the Asura’s tapasya. The Demon’s fire will burn all your realms to a crisp, unless you stop his penance.

Have you heard what Hiranyakashyapu wants, O Father? He says, ‘Brahma created the universe and all its beings with his tapasya. He dwells in the loftiest world, Satyaloka. I shall gain that realm with dhyana. I do not care if this body of mine perishes for me to attain my end. Time has no end and neither the Atman. If I need to die and be born a thousand times before I gain Satyaloka, I am prepared for it.

I will have such power that I will transform the essential nature of creation: I will make Devas of my Asuras and demons of the Devas. I will turn vice into virtue, and punya into paapa. There is no use attaining realms like Dhruva's: which perish when the kalpa ends. I shall gain Satyaloka, the highest world, the only immortal one!'

This, O Brahma, is Hiranyakashyapu's ambition. Be prepared for him to conquer your world, for his tapasya is fierce, O Lord, it is incomparable."

Brahma, the Self-born Creator, flew down to the earth on his cosmic Swan, to the valley below Mandara, where the Demon stood like a statue, an embodiment of dhyana. Bhrigu, Daksha and his other sons, the greatest Munis, came with the Creator.

At first, they could not see Hiranyakashyapu, for what remained of his body was covered by an immense anthill, on which grass and reeds also grew. The ants within had devoured a fair portion of his body and licked up a lot of his blood. Then Brahma saw the anthill that shone as if a sun was trapped within it.

Smiling, the Pitama said loudly, "O great son of Kashyapa Muni, your tapasya is fruitful. I, Brahma have come to give you whatever boon you want. Lower yourself from your yogasana. I have seen many tapasyas, but never one to match yours. Ah, look at you, ants have gnawed away your flesh, yet you stand on, sustaining yourself on just prana. Hiranyakashyapu, not the greatest Rishis of the past, none of the future, shall ever equal this dhyana of yours. No one can live for a hundred years of the Devas without even a sip of water passing his lips.

Asuraraja, you have conquered me with your courage, your incredible determination. Open your eyes and look at me. Let my very vision be a great blessing for a mortal like you!"

And Brahma sprinkled the eternal waters from his kamandalu over the Demon's ant-eaten body. At once, the Asura stood forth – a splendid young man, full of youth and vigour. His body was hard as diamonds now and shone like gold. He emerged from his anthill like fire from arani sticks. Hiranyakashyapu saw Brahma, full of glory, mounted on his Swan, and the Asura prostrated before the Creator. Tears coursing down his handsome face, his hair standing on end for ecstasy, he began to eulogize Brahma:

'Kalpanta kaalashrishtena yo andhena tamasaavritam; Aaatmana trivritaa chedam srijatyavati lumpati;

Abhivyagna jagadidam svayamjyoti svarochisha; rajah sattva tamodhamne parayah mahate namah!

When the kalpa ends and Time engulfs the universe in darkness, You, O self-illumined one, manifest the cosmos again by your light. With your three essences of sattva, rajas and tamas, you create, preserve and destroy all things.

I salute you, O support of the three gunas: You, the highest being, who pervades everything. I salute you, O primeval Seed, who know the unity of all existence, and the many that are always the one. I salute you, who manifests yourself as prana, the indriyas, the mind, the intellect and all the rest.

You are the Mukhyaprana, the Breath of all breaths, the Sutratman, the string threaded through the universe. You are the master of all that breathe and move, and of the inert, too. You control our consciousness, our breath and our senses. You control matter, the outer organs of sense and the inner one of knowledge.

Your body is the Veda, in which the yagnas that require four priests are told. You gave the world the seven sacrifices: Agnistoma, Atyagnistoma, Uktha, Shodasi, Ataptoryama and Vajapeya. You are the single Soul of all the living, who knows them all. You are Time, that never blinks, who inexorably fetches the living to death. You are the Creator, who remains beyond your creation, immaculate, reposed.

Nothing that exists is apart from you. All knowledge, too, is your body. You transcend the Pradhana, You, Hiranyagarbha, the Golden Egg that contains all the stars within you as your semen.

This universe is just your sthularupa, visible to the eye. Your sukshmarupa, the Soul of everything, is invisible. You pervade all this, yet transcend it always. I bow to you, O greatest of boon givers. Be pleased to grant me the boon I want, as well."

Hiranyakashyapu paused, drew a great breath, then said in his echoing voice, "*Bhutebhyastva dvishrishtyebhyo, mrityurmaa bhunmama prabho. Na bhumow nambare mrityurna narerna, mrigerna. Apratidvandvatam yuddhe ekapatyam cha dehinam. Tapa yoga prabhavanam yann rishyati karhichit.*

Grant that none among your creatures shall kill me, Lord. Let me not die by day or by night, on earth or in the sky, by man or beast. Let no weapon kill me, not inside a dwelling or outside. Let none of the living or the insentient kill me, no Deva or Asura or Naga. Grant that no enemy shall be able to face me in battle and that I become emperor of the worlds. Give me that natural splendour that you have yourself, and the guardians of the four quarters, and which Rishis gain after long yoga and tapasya," ' said Narada to Yudhishtira,"

Suka said to Parikshit.

HIRANYAKASHYAPU AND PRAHLADA

"NARADA CONTINUED, 'BRAHMA, WHO WAS PLEASED WITH Hiranyakashyapu, raised his lustrous hand over the Demon, granting him his boons. He said, "Asura, the boons you ask for are extraordinary, yet I grant you what you ask."

With that, Brahma vanished from there, as Hiranyakashyapu and the Prajapatis sang his praises. Now Hiranyakashyapu had a golden body, and with Brahma's boon, he swore to take revenge on Vishnu for killing Hiranyaksha. Hiranyakashyapu conquered the three worlds. He conquered the kings of the Devas and Asuras, and of mortal men. He set his foot upon the heads of the lords of the gandharvas, the garudas and the nagas; he ruled the siddhas, charanas and the vidyadharas; he became monarch of the rishis, the pitrs and the manus, of the yakshas, the rakshasas, pisachas, bhutas and pretas. He conquered all the living races and species.

The Golden Demon proclaimed himself master of the directions and of their Guardians. He moved to Devaloka, and began living in Amravati, in Indra's very palace, once built by Viswakarman: ensconced in the immortal garden, the Nandana, where all the most exquisite beauty in the universe exists. Here were emerald terraces, which were gained by steps made of slabs of the darkest coral. The walls were crystal and the pillars of lapis lazuli. Here were ruby seats in enchanted passages and unimaginable apartments. In grand bedchambers, were beds with sheets smooth and white as sea-foam, their posts festooned with strings of pearls. The apsaras that glided through these chambers had teeth that were like those pearls, too! Their anklets sang softly as they went, watching their own unearthly beauty in mirrors bordered with more jewels.

Hiranyakashyapu was undisputed sovereign of the three worlds. The Devas served him, and he ground them underfoot, treating them with contempt and harshness. All the gods, save Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, brought gifts to the Demon and were servile to him. He sat in the Sudharma upon Indra's ruby throne, his eyes red with wine and his golden form rippling with physical, mental and sovereign power. No king through all the ages had ever enjoyed such power, not even Indra had.

Why, we rishis and gandharvas, Viswavasu, Tumburu and I sang Hiranyakashyapu's praises, as did the siddhas, charanas and vidyadharas. The apsaras danced for him. Those that live by varnasrama, by yagnas, brought him untold wealth as dakshina and began to worship him as their Lord. With his occult powers he took for himself the sacred havis set aside at numberless sacrifices for the many gods.

Such was his power that the Earth, with her seven continents, yielded a wealth of food, grain and fruit, to him, without anyone tilling her, or planting seeds. The heavens brought excellent rains in their proper season. The subtle akasa above the sky revealed all kinds of miracles and wonders to fascinate the Asura. With arms of waves, the seven seas brought treasures from their deeps for him: the rarest gems. Mountains warmed and embellished their lofty-roofed caves for his amorous sport. Trees and plants flowered and bore fruit in and out of season to please Hiranyakashyapu, and he took upon himself the awesome and elemental powers of the Lokapalas.

But remember, Yudhishtira, Hiranyakashyapu was an Asura. He subdued all creation, but he did not quell his own senses or desires. He indulged himself to surfeit; he enjoyed every sort of pleasure the worlds had to offer him, yet he felt no true joy. Intoxicated with incalculable wealth, boundless power, arrogant with these, he was a law unto himself, subject to no other, not the planets in the heavens or the deities of the earth and the under-realms. He lived as he pleased, violating every ancient and sacred code. He drew upon himself the silent curses of every holy being and man in creation; yet, he was invincible and ruled for seventy-one yugas.

Having failed in their every effort to be rid of the Golden Demon, the ancient rulers of the ten directions and the highest Rishis came finally to Achyuta, to Vishnu. They purified their bodies and minds with a long fast, during which they neither ate nor slept, and worshipped Him, the ultimate master of the senses. They sang stotras of him, his praises.

Suddenly, they heard an asariri, a voice that seemed to resound from the very depths of the sky, a voice like thunder, which yet uncannily swept their hearts with peace and hope.

Said the Voice, 'Let fear vanish from your hearts and lives, O masters of creation! I am already aware of Hiranyakashyapu's tyranny and I will bring the Demon down. He has violated dharma over and over. He is steeped in every sin, and he will die. But you have to wait a while, my friends, a short while longer for his time to die has not yet come. He will die when he oppresses his own son, Prahlada, who shall be one of my greatest bhaktas.'

The Devas, the Rishis and the rest went back to their homes, and now fear had vanished from their hearts. Faith filled them that surely now the Golden Demon was as good as dead. However, they did wonder a trifle at what the Lord's asariri had said finally: about Hiranyakashyapu's son Prahlada being Vishnu's devotee.

Hiranyakashyapu had four exceptional sons, of whom Prahlada was famed for his virtues. From his childhood, he was drawn and devoted to Rishis and the scriptures. His conduct was gentle and flawless, his character pure. He was truthful, a master (naturally), of his senses. Prahlada was loved by the people like their own son, and he in turn requited this almost uncanny adoration.

Whenever he came upon a Rishi or any learned man, Hiranyakashyapu's son attended on him even like a common servant. He was kind and loving to the poor and the sick and those that suffered in any way, like a father, a mother even. To his peers in age he was like a brother, and his gurus he treated like God. Pride laid no hand upon this prince, replete though he was with every fine quality, every noble trait, extraordinary beauty and the wealth of the worlds to call his own.

It seemed that Prahlada was intensely aware of the evanescence of all that he owned, and experienced in his father's palace. No pleasure moved him nor any difficulty disturb him. He seemed entirely free of mundane ambition. He was free from sexual desire. In short, Prahlada was born into the race of Asuras, but no quality in that prince was in the least demonic, with rajas or tamas.

The greatest Rishis have extolled prince Prahlada's qualities. Why, Pandava, even today the virtues of Hiranyakashyapu's son are remembered. In sabhas where the lives of the greatest souls are narrated, even the Devas speak of Prahlada the Asura. The truth is that even the most glowing praise could hardly capture the grandess of Prahlada, for he was that rarest of jivas – one whose mind flowed naturally, effortlessly, towards Vishnu Narayana.

As a small child, he showed no interest in the finest toys in the universe. His thoughts remained indrawn, absorbed in the Lord he saw in his heart. Prahlada did not see the world as other children do; why, the most profound Munis hardly see the world as that demon prince did.

Vishnu was always with Prahlada, and he was mainly unaware of where or how he sat, ate or drank, walked, lay down or slept. Absorbed, mad with God's love surging in him, at times he sobbed for ecstasy, at others he laughed aloud, a child, to think of the Lord's lila; at other times, he burst into spontaneous song in joy: songs of Hari that came to him in sudden uncontrollable inspiration. Often, he would begin dancing, or loudly to chant God's thousand names. Then he would mimic the gait and the sport of Vishnu.

At yet other times, he became still as a corpse, or a stone, his hair standing on end, his eyes half shut, lids unwinking, only tears of rapture coursing down his handsome face.

Prahlada radiated the divine grace that filled him. Sad or evil men he encountered found themselves transformed after meeting him, subtly, miraculously: as if healing came over them, deep remembrance of themselves. The world loved Prahlada, for he was a prince of the spirit. But his father hated this son of his; he inflicted the most savage torments on the youth."

Yudhishtira asked, "Why did Hiranyakashyapu torture a prince like Prahlada? Parents might seek to correct recalcitrant or wayward children, but they can never hate them. How could the Golden Demon treat a son as pure as Prahlada cruelly? And I have heard Hiranyakashyapu plotted even to kill his own son."

Narada said, "We all know that Sukra Bhargava is the Guru of the Asuras, and the preceptor of the greatest Demon monarchs. Sukra's sons Sanda and Amarka lived near Hiranyakashyapu's palace. The Demon sent Prahlada to these, whom he thought to be fit masters for his son. He sent the precociously intelligent prince to study alongside other Asura children – to learn whatever all young Asuras should know. Prahlada imbibed whatever Sukra's sons taught him easily, but he did not accept much of what he heard from them, for their teachings were materialistic, rajasic, based on the difference between oneself and others, based on possessions and power.

One day, when Prahlada was home on a visit from his gurus' asrama, Hiranyakashyapu, who at first loved his son as fondly as any father, took the prince onto his lap and asked, 'Sweet child, tell me what you consider to be good and true above all else.'

The child replied, 'Father, king of the Asuras, all embodied jivas identify themselves with their bodies, and they experience sorrow and suffering. I think it best if they abandon their homes and possessions, their families, all of which imprison them in dark attachment, like a deep and dry well, and cause their spiritual fall. I think men should take themselves into forests and seek sanctuary in Hari, who alone kills our misery, and sets us free.'

When Hiranyakashyapu heard what his child said about Vishnu, his own sworn enemy, who had killed his brother, at first he laughed, thinking someone had influenced Prahlada, temporarily. He called Sanda and Amarka and told them what his son had said, warning them to be watchful that no Vishnubhaktas came anywhere near his prince, to corrupt his tender heart.

When Prahlada went back to his masters' hermitage, his gurus called him apart, alone. They praised him extravagantly, then asked, 'Bless you, brilliant child! Joy of your race, may you always be happy. But, Prahlada, tell us where did you learn what you said to your father, when he asked you what you considered to be good and true? Hardly any young men of your age would answer as you did. Did this come from your own heart, or did someone tell you these things?'

Prahlada said gravely, yet smiling too, 'I salute the Lord, by whose maya men are deceived and distinguish themselves from one another, themselves from the world, from the rest of creation. Only ignorant minds make such differences; the truth is that we are all one and we are the Lord, our God.

O my masters, when the Lord Vishnu blesses you, these feelings of distinction will melt away from your hearts, and you will see Him everywhere, within yourselves and without. You will see no difference then between your own interests and the interest of all men, why, of the universe – for you will see there are not two, but just the One, everywhere, always.

Of course, my masters, it is no wonder that all of us are bemused by the Lord's yogamaya. Why, Brahma and the knowers of the Veda are confounded when they try to fathom Hari. As for me, it seems his grace is upon me – for I see less and less distinction between myself and others. Ah, when He is near me, my mind leaps to him as iron shavings do to a great magnet, helplessly. My mind flees to him, abandoning everything else. I am helpless in this, Acharyas; He does it to me; He owns my heart; He calls me.' With this, Prahlada fell silent.

Sanda and Amarka seemed to fly into a rage. Of course, they knew the prince spoke the truth, but they were no better than Hiranyakashyapu's servants, they were hardly freed. It was their sovereign's will they now carried out. Their faces red, in apparent fury, they cried, 'Fetch a cane! This boy will bring shame on us all. He is a dangerous rebel, a heretic. He is evil, only a thrashing can do him any good. Ah, he is a tree of thorns in the sandalwood forest of our ancient race. Vishnu is the axe that fells the trees of the forest of our people, and this boy's has become that axe's very handle!'

Then on, those sons of Sukra were always stern and disapproving with Prahlada, and at Hiranyakashyapu's behest, taught him only subjects that dwelt upon the three lesser aims of life: namely, dharma, artha and kama. Of moksha, they never spoke, as if such a thing did not exist – the final goal.

In time, Sanda and Amarka were convinced they had turned Prahlada's mind away from his obsession with Vishnu. They felt certain the boy had mastered the four methods of diplomacy, as his father wanted – conciliation, subsidy, subversion and open force. With the prince's mother helping them, they brought Prahlada, bathed, bejewelled and clad in fine royal silk, before his august father for the second time.

Prahlada solemnly prostrated at his father's feet. Hiranyakashyapu raised him up, and embraced him long and ardently. Hiranyakashyapu sat him in his lap again, kissed the top of his head and shed tears of joy. His face alight, the Emperor of the three worlds said to his son, 'Prahlada, my precious child, may you have a long and happy life! Now tell me what you have learnt from your wise masters – tell me the finest, highest lessons you have learnt from them.'

Prahlada replied, 'Hearing about Vishnu, singing about Him, thinking of Him, worshipping Him, saluting Him, serving Him, being his comrade, his servant, and abandoning one's self and everything one owns to Him – these are the nine great bhaktis. If any man can learn these and live by them, he shall indeed have had the highest education, the learning beyond which there is no other. This is what I have learnt, father.'

Hiranyakashyapu's lips were white with anger. He snarled at Sanda and Amarka, 'Vile, perverse acharyas! How do you teach my son to take my enemy's side? You have betrayed me and filled my child's head with ludicrous beliefs. In the guise of being my wellwishers you have lived off my generosity. You are traitors, and the evil wrought by enemies like you takes time to manifest itself, just as the fruit of his sins come to a man as disease only in his old age.'

Sukra Bhargava's sons retorted, 'Indrashatro, O enemy of Indra, neither of us has taught your prince what he says to you. This is innate to the boy, his very nature, his inmost being. Restrain your anger, Hiranyakashyapu, we are not guilty of what you charge us with.'

The Asura turned to Prahlada again, 'Evil child, if your gurus did not teach you what you just said, who did?'

The radiant prince replied, 'Jivas cannot restrain their senses and they turn round and round upon the wheel of samsara, this world of illusions. Never sated, they taste the same pleasures and pains, again and again. All they think of is their money, their homes, their wives and children. Father, when their natures are such, not from the teachings of any Guru can they ever develop bhakti for Vishnu.

They believe always that the source of joy lies outside themselves, in one form or another. How will they ever perceive Mahavishnu, who dwells in the deepest cave of their own hearts, who can be seen only by the vision that looks within? The ones that looks outside, the Vedic ritualists, are like a crowd of blind men being led by a rope tied round their necks: being led by another blind man! The thick rope of ritual comprises many strands – practices, rituals, beliefs, all to fulfil desires of here and the hereafter. These men are cattle in tether to their blind lusts; they can never be free.

Only when a jiva bathes his head in the padadhuli, the spirit dust from the feet of a true bhakta, who has no possession of any kind except the Lord Vishnu, does that sishya's mind take a true turn in the direction of liberation, towards the sacred feet of God. And this world of samsara never ceases until the mind turns to those Feet.'

Prahlada fell silent. With a terrible roar, Hiranyakashyapu thrust his son off his lap so the boy fell on the floor. His eyes flaming, the Demon hissed at his rakshasa guards, 'Take this traitor away and kill him! He wants to be a servant of Vishnu who killed my brother Hiranyaksha. Prahlada is guilty of his uncle's murder. He was just five when he began this madness, turned against his race, his own father. When he can break trust with his own parents, what good shall he be to Vishnu?

Someone who does me good, like a fine specific: even if he is not related to me by blood, I must think of him as my relative, even my own son. But one like this wretched child, even if he is born of my loins, must be thought of as a mortal sickness and got rid of. When a limb becomes gangrenous, it must be cut off to save the rest of the body. So with this evil child: he must be killed – with poison, while he sleeps or while he is awake. Just as a seductive woman is a mortal peril to a Rishi's wellbeing, so is this boy to ours. I command you: kill him, kill him now!'

His fierce rakshasa guardsmen, fanged, with copper hair and beards, rushed growling at young Prahlada and thrust their tridents at him. They could not pierce his skin, and meanwhile, the prince lapsed into samadhi. Vishnu in his heart absorbed him, so he felt neither fear nor pain, but was entirely lost in his precious Lord.

Hiranyakashyapu trembled on his throne. During the years, whenever the madness seized him, the Demon tried to murder his son in every conceivable manner. He had him trampled by elephants, stung by cobras, had the most powerful sorcerers cast fatal spells upon the boy, had him flung down cliffs, poisoned, starved in dungeons full of scorpions, exposed to extremes of the elements, burnt by fire. He could not kill young Prahlada.

Panic gripped the Golden Asura, master of the three worlds. He was anxious, 'I have tried to kill this son of mine so many times and failed. He stands calmly before me, after all this, unafraid and smiling. But he will not forget what I have done. I cannot fathom Prahlada. He has no fear and death cannot approach him. How I loathe this child of mine. Can it be that I shall die because of him? For otherwise, I am immortal too.'

Once, Sanda and Amarka were alone with their stricken, desperate sovereign. They said to him, 'On your own, with no help, you conquered the three worlds, brushing aside their vast armies like straw dolls. You raise a brow and the Lokapalas tremble. We cannot understand why fear has laid its hand upon you now. As for Prahlada, he is still a child, too young to hurt you. If you are still afraid, let us bind him with Varuna Deva's paasa, until our father Sukra returns. He will tell you how to overcome your fear.'

They paused, then Sanda added softly, 'Also, my lord, with time and age, all beings change. So might Prahlada.'

Hiranyakashyapu thought a moment, then said to his Guru's sons, 'Instruct the boy, then, in the dharma of kings and of grihastas.'

Again those teachers took the ever-serene Prahlada with them, and taught him the ways or dharma, artha and kama – morality, power and pleasure. However, he did not set any store by what they taught, for these were obviously inferior teachings when compared to the living truth he saw in his heart, daily, the infinite love of Hari. These were the teachings of the worldly for the worldly. They were not for him.

Whenever their masters were away, the other disciples would call Prahlada to play. Once, Prahlada, who brimmed with love for them, spoke to them about samsara and the plight of men snared in the cycle of births and deaths. The Asura youths, who were young and their minds uncorrupted, were powerfully drawn to what their friend was saying. He touched their hearts, their souls. They set aside their playthings and gathered round their illumined comrade,' said Narada to Yudhishtira," said Suka Deva to Parikshit.

PRAHLADA'S SERMON

"NARADA CONTINUED, O KING, 'PRAHLADA SAID, "WISE JIVAS SHOULD begin practising the Bhagavata dharma, the ways of worshipping God, from their boyhood. My friends, it is only in a human birth that the way of bhakti can be followed, and a human birth is rare. The highest thing a man can aspire to is to surrender himself at the feet of the Lord, whereupon he finds peace and infinite ecstasy, past telling.

Vishnu is the only and final beloved, the dearest one, closer to oneself than oneself; He is the Atman, the Guru, and the ultimate friend of all beings.

Just as all embodied beings experience sorrow, naturally, for it comes inevitably during their lives, so, too, do they experience pleasure and joy – without effort. But beyond this brief and exhausting life, we achieve little, next to nothing, by attending to gaining pleasure and avoiding pain while we are in our bodies. A man whose desires rule him can never attain to the condition of bliss that they do that serve the Lord, the incomparable, immortal rapture.

We are all enmeshed in the net of samsara. Yet we are most fortunate to be born with intelligence, and we must look beyond the brief span of this bodily existence to the salvation of our souls. At most we might live a hundred years, of which half we spend asleep – like the dead. Of the half that remain, the first twenty we spend in the ignorance of childhood, the playfulness and irresponsibility of youth. Another twenty years, if we last that long, we spend in the decrepitude of old age. And the rest, which comes in between, we fritter away, bound like slaves to domestic life, its cares, its sexual pursuits, its infatuations and numberless desires, responsibilities and conflicts.

When do we devote time towards the liberation of our spirits, and what is more important than that? What can even remotely compare with that final quest and its goal – nirvana?

No man attached to his home, a slave of his senses, shackled by his attachment to his family, can make the effort required to free himself. When a man hankers after wealth, the hankering becomes more vital to him than his life, whether he is a thief, a servant, a merchant, anyone. When a man is intimate with his wife, his woman, can he ever think of giving up those intimacies, and his affection for his lisping children, the sound of their laughter, the company of his close friends? Can he abandon his sons and daughters, his brothers and sisters, his aged and sickly parents? No, all these bind him with a thousand, a million chains: to ignorance and darkness.

His house and its furniture bind a grihasta, his cattle, his servants, his hereditary vocation: handed down the generations. All these enslave his mind, so it can never flow towards the holy feet of Vishnu. The pleasures he has never satisfy a man and he pursues them blindly, wanting more and more; and all the while he is less and less satisfied. He is greed's slave, who thinks of gluttony and sexual indulgence as life's main purposes."

Such was the attraction of the truths he spoke, his young companions never interrupted him, but sat entranced, for what he was saying awakened their souls, and for the first time. It even seemed that Someone Else spoke to them in their friend's voice, calling them deeply, irresistibly.

Prahlada continued, "A grihasta can hardly follow the path of renunciation. You must set foot on the path to God before you are snared helplessly in the wide net of samsara. Even when intense miseries afflict a grihasta, he hardly turns his mind towards Hari – so entangled is he in the cares and joys of family life. A householder, whose senses are not restrained, will surely have unbridled greed for wealth, too. He will sin to acquire wealth, regardless of the consequences that he will inevitably suffer in this world and the next.

Sweet friends, listen to me. The path upon which you are setting yourselves, the materialistic way, leads to bondage and ruin. A grihasta, though he knows all the philosophy there is to know, can never hope to attain the Atman. For he can never transcend the distinction between his own interest and that of his fellow men. None that is selfish can attain to his soul, which is indeed the soul of everyone. Such a jiva journeys endlessly through the labyrinths of transmigration.

The grihasta is a pet monkey. The chain round his neck is his attachment for his children, and the woman on whom he has sired the children holds that chain. It is an unbreakable chain, and only if he seeks the help of Krishna, shall he ever break its fearful links. So, even now, my dear friends, as I love you even as I do myself, I say to you – seek shelter only in Narayana. Ignore those that tell you otherwise; there is no other sanctuary, no other peace except at his feet, in his service, in his eternal love. There is no other freedom or salvation. Seek him; he is the Primeval Being, the goal of the wise that have left all their attachments behind them."

None of his companions stirred, but waited for the prince to continue. "O Asuraputras, let me tell you a secret – it is not at all difficult to please the Lord Vishnu! He is the inmost Spirit, and he is everywhere. There is no place or time where you cannot commune with him. He is in Brahma, in the most evolved and the lowest creature, in the panchamabhuta, the elements, in the mahatattva and its evolutes, in the gunas, both when they are reposed and when they are disturbed. He dwells everywhere, in all things, always – always Himself, always beyond what he pervades. He is the Unchanging One, the Eternal Spirit, and the Lord.

No one has ever defined him. He can never be divided; He is the pervader and the pervaded. He is the immaculate One, the beginningless bliss; only in creation he keeps his infinite nature in abeyance, for his sport! He manifests himself as the many, and as you and me. I can tell you that his nature is love, and if you renounce hatred and competition, he will be pleased.

And if God is pleased with a bhakta, what is there that such a man cannot have? Dharma, artha and kama bear their fruit in time, of themselves, even as night follows day and day again follows night. These need not concern us. Why, even moksha, which the wisest Munis seek, need never concern us – as long as we have bhakti, devotion to Krishna's feet! As long as we can sing his praises and enjoy the fathomless ecstasy of serving him.

It is true that the Vedas do deal with dharma, artha and kama, and with moksha too. But I believe that their inmost and deepest teaching is bhakti – devotion to God. I have no doubt about this. The final goal, thus the only one, is surrender to the Lord. Then there is no more birth or death, pleasure or pain. He is the only friend, the only true Guru.

The Rishi Narayana, Nara's companion, once told Narada Muni what I am telling you today, about this Bhagavata dharma. This teaching of nine limbs shall shine forth from those that are fortunate enough to believe in what the Sages preach, who have renounced the world and cling to the holy feet of God. It was Narada that taught me this way of bhakti."

His young Asura friends said, "But Prahlada, neither you nor we have contact with any great Rishis. Sanda and Amarka are our only teachers. And before you came here to their asrama, you were cloistered in the women's harem in your father's palace. Gentle prince, how did you learn this Bhagavata dharma? Who really taught it to you?"

KNOWING THE SELF

PRAHLADA REPLIED TO HIS FRIENDS, “WHEN MY FATHER WENT AWAY to Mount Mandara to perform his great tapasya, the Devas thought, ‘Ah, by the Lord’s grace, the wretched Demon is dead. His sins have devoured him as ants do a serpent.’ Indra and his people prepared to go to war against our people, the Asuras. The Asuras could not stand against the army of Devaloka and fled in all directions. They were so terrified, they left their homes, their women and children, and fled.

In the hot flush of triumph, the gods entered our city, our palace, and plundered it as they pleased. Indra took my mother captive. As his soldiers hauled her away, sobbing like a frightened sparrow, the Devarishi Narada saw her.

Narada said to Indra, ‘Let her go, Devendra! She is an innocent. Is it dharma that you take another man’s wife prisoner? Have you become an Asura yourself that you commit this most terrible sin, O noblest of Devas?’

Indra answered him, ‘This Asuri bears a formidable child inside her womb; Hiranyakashyapu’s son grows within her. I will release her only after the child is born and I have killed him.’

Narada said, ‘She bears a sinless soul inside her. He will be a Mahataman, Lord Vishnu’s greatest bhakta and his servant. He shall have great spiritual power, and anyway you shall not be able to kill him.’

At which, Indra let my mother go. Out of his devotion to Vishnu, the king of the Devas made a pradakshina around her, with folded hands, and flew back to Amravati, his city in heaven. Narada brought my mother to his asrama and said to her, 'My child, you stay here until your husband returns. So she did – serving that Maharishi like a sishyaa, and praying all the while for the child growing in her womb, and praying that it would be born only when she wanted, when danger had passed. It was while my mother stayed in Narada Muni's asrama, that he taught her the Bhagavata dharma, the bhakti marga to enlightenment, knowing that I, inside my mother's body, would absorb it.

In time, my mother forgot that instruction – she wasn't drawn to it naturally, nor equipped to retain it. But by Narada's blessing, the Bhagavata dharma has remained fresh in my heart, as if I still hear it constantly from his lips! Listen to that dharma, my friends, and you shall also find faith, which will fetch wisdom to your hearts and set you free from this samsara.

By God's will, his lila as the Time Spirit, six sorts of change come over the body – conception, existence, growth, maturity, decay and death. These affect only the body not the spirit that inhabits it, rather as the fruit that grows on a tree undergoes its own changes but does not affect the tree. The Atman is Un-born, eternal, changeless, undecaying, without a second, distinct from the body, ever untouched by all things material. For this soul, the body is an object, a field of expression. The soul itself is pure consciousness, without volition, the foundation of all things, the universe, perfect awareness, the cause of causes, pervasive, unattached, and boundless.

When one understands these attributes of the Atman, one naturally gives up the false identification with the body, even the feeling of owning the body. One sheds that ignorance like a set of worn clothes. As the smelter of gold extracts the essential metal from ore, the true master in the science of the Spirit extracts the gold of the Brahman from the mine of the body, in which that immortal treasure is latent.

Mulaprakriti, mahatattva, ahamkara and the five tanmatras are the eightfold Prakriti. Sattva, rajas and tamas are the three gunas that constitute this Prakriti. The ten senses, the mind, the five material elements – the ancient masters speak of these sixteen as having evolved from Prakriti. The combination of these forms the mind-body, and the Purusha, the single origin, stands apart from these as a witness. Yet he is the one that integrates all these, holds them together.

The body, the embodied jiva, is a compound of all the above – of two kinds, unmoving like rocks and trees, or moving like the animals, insects, birds and us. In the body the wise reject the various forms of prakriti, saying 'neti, neti': 'not this, not this.' Finally, after the last negation, they arrive at the Purusha, the true Self.

A man should watch the subsistence of his body, when it has consciousness; and its decay when consciousness departs. He should investigate the Atman with discrimination, purifying his body and mind and by reading the Holy Scriptures, God's word to him in this world. He should meditate upon creation, preservation and dissolution.

The three states of buddhi, the intellect, are waking, sleep and dream. The awareness that is always aloof from these, the eternal watcher, is the Atman, the soul. Waking, sleep and dreams are the results of karma; they are born of the three gunas of Prakriti. The Atman pervades all three, but he is distinct from them. He is like the wind that carries a scent of flowers, and appears to be identical with that scent but in fact is not: but is odourless.

Samsara is not real; it only appears to be so and is founded only in the ignorance of the true nature of reality. Ignorance produces the false sense of identity with the three states of buddhi, products of the gunas, and with the karma they cause. It is, in fact, a dream, quite unreal. To understand this truth intellectually cannot liberate a man; he must experience it with intuition, he must dissolve in enlightenment.

Ignorance is the seed that grows into the tangled plant of karma. Yoga, union with God, destroys this false seed of samsara and brings eternal peace. There are many ways to attain moksha, but the simplest is the one God Himself advocates – the way of virtue that leads to bhakti, the deepest devotion.

The way of bhakti involves cultivating some disciplines – revering one's Guru with dedicated service; renouncing all one's possessions to the Lord; being in constant touch with other bhaktas who lead holy lives, worshipping the Paramatman regularly. The bhakta listens to the legends of God's incarnations and his lila until belief dawns on his heart; he gives praise with song, meditates upon the Lord's Form of grace. The seeker adores the Lord as his Sages and his images, equally; he serves the needy, giving as much as he can, with the feeling in his heart that God dwells in them and that he is serving Vishnu when he serves the poor and the needy.

When the bhakta observes these rites, he succeeds in subduing his senses and passions, and instead, he develops a lust, rati, for Lord Vasudeva! When he listens to Hari's songs or his Purana about the Avataras, this devotee experiences untold rapture. His hair stands on end, his voice quivers and he sings and dances helplessly himself, in transport. Like a madman he laughs, sobs, falls still and silent as a stone, plunges into plumbless dhyana, helplessly. He bows to everyone that he sees and clasps their feet as if they were the Lord; for that is who he sees in them, shining forth.

He cries God's names aloud, *Hari, Vishnu, Narayana, Krishna, Govinda,* beside himself, panting, unconcerned about what the world thinks of him. And then, this bhakta is suddenly liberated from samsara; never again does he die or is he born. He becomes one with Mahavishnu, the sleeper upon primeval waters. The greatest Munis say this embrace, this communion, incinerates all the karma of the jiva at their roots and he has nirvana, the changeless condition. He is one with the Brahman; he has the final Bliss."

His face alight to share this wisdom, Prahlada paused a moment before he continued, "So, sweet companions, meditate in your heart upon Him who is Lord of all hearts! I tell you again, it is not hard to commune with Hari Narayana. Like the cosmic akasa he pervades us all: He is all of us. He is the only true wellwisher, the only real friend and benefactor. He is the one that delivers us from pain and death. Tell me, when we are not animals, what use is there in pursuing pleasures that even animals can. Our births are evolved ones; must we not fulfil their higher purpose – to find the eternal God who dwells in our bodies, in all this creation?

Our lives are short for sure, and none of us know how long they will last. Can any man take his house and wealth, his wife and children, his cattle or lands, his elephants or power with him, when he dies?" It seemed the prince was certainly, also, his father's son! Prahlada had realised the basic truth of the brief, fleeting nature of life just as Hiranyakashyapu had. But he had chosen to seek a different way out from the inevitability of death – not to prevent it, but to transcend it.

The prince went on, "The higher worlds of delight that a man can attain by performing Vedic rituals, the realms of Devaloka – these, too, are transient. They ensnare a jiva with binding passions, and when his punya is exhausted, he falls from them as surely as a fruit does from its branch when it is ripe. The jiva falls down into the darkness of lesser worlds again, and resumes his rituals to regain the pleasures of heaven: only to lose them again, when the punya, the karma, of those rites is exhausted.

God is the only final sanctuary, from where there is no return to sorrow.

When a man has pretensions to wisdom, and in fact is not enlightened, all the work that he does fetches him fruit opposite from those he wanted. All men work to stave off pain and have happiness. In fact, such karma brings a man deeper pain. A man lives his life as a slave to his body, and its incessant demands. Finally, what is this body except food for dogs and jackals? It is here today, but gone tomorrow. Yet we serve it as our final master.

If a man's own body is so fleeting, how much more so are his wife and children, his house, his wealth, kingdom, animals, servants and friends. All these we consider in some strange manner to belong to us; yet, none of them do. How can they, when our own bodies are not ours? All these, including one's body, are of no use to the soul that has infinite bliss, because such bliss is the nature of the Atman.

Asuraputras, what real joy can we jivas have from pursuing worldly pleasures, when we are born burdened with the karma of lives gone by, their sins? With these bodies we indulge in more karma, and the result is another body after we die. Both the body and the karma it performs are the fruit of agyana, ignorance. Life is short and where is the time for enjoyment between birth and death?

It is true that Vishnu supports material values, as well, just as he does everything that exists. It is he that bestows dharma, artha and kama on those that desire them; and indeed these are stages the jiva passes through on its long journey of many births towards nirvana. But it is best, my friends, to tread the way that leads to Him: for that is the only path to salvation, to bliss. The rest is illusion.

Hari is the Self that dwells in all of us. He is the 'I', the only one. He is the Lord, the beloved and the Atman in all beings. And, indeed, all beings are formed out of the primordial elements, the mahabhutas, which are the Lord's creation. So, all this belongs only to Him! The rest is delusion, his maya. Grace is the reward for any being who serves the Lord Vishnu: be the being a Deva, an Asura, a human, yaksha, gandharva or anyone. The Lord has never said that an Asura or a rakshasa shall not serve him and find peace by doing so. Look at me, I am a living example. I am an Asura, but I serve my Hari, and he gives me such ecstasy that I cannot begin to describe that joy. It can be all of yours, too.

Just by being born a brahmana, a Deva or a Rishi's son does not guarantee the Lord's grace. His ways are mysterious and always just his own to know. Being perfectly moral or deeply learned does not necessarily bring down his grace; not charity, austerity, rituals of purification, penance or sacrifices please him. It is bhakti that pleases the Lord, devotion for its own sake. All the rest are hollow, meaningless. So, friends, set an image of Vishnu in your hearts, and see him all around you, everywhere and in everyone, even as you do in yourselves.

Those who say that an Asura cannot have Hari's grace lie. Asuras, rakshasas, yakshas, women, sudras, gopas, birds, beasts and the worst sinners have all found him with simple bhakti. And this is the only aim of our lives – to find that single, consuming devotion," said Prahlada,'

Narada told Yudhishtira,"

Said Suka Muni to Parikshit.

THE DEATH OF HIRANYAKASHYAPU

"NARADA CONTINUED, 'THEIR HEARTS BEING INNOCENT AND PURE, the Asura boys accepted what Prahlada told them and turned away from the teachings of their masters. Sanda and Amarka saw how their wards became increasingly withdrawn, how each of them sought solitude whenever he could and turned his mind inwards in dhyana and bhakti. Sukra's sons grew afraid that the blame for this would fall on them, and they came to Hiranyakashyapu and told him what had happened in their gurukulam.

For a moment, the Golden Demon grew very still; then he began to tremble violently. Prahlada was present in his father's court. Hiranya hissed at him like an angry serpent; he roared at his son like a great tiger. He abused the boy in the vilest language. Prahlada stood humble and unmoved in the face of his father's wrath.

Hiranyakashyapu raged at his prince, "Evil child, dare you defy me? The worlds and their Guardians tremble at the very thought of displeasing me, but you dare to flout my wishes so brashly? Who is the source of your daring? I will kill you myself!"

Prahlada said serenely, "Father, the source of my strength is he that is the source of yours, as well. Vishnu controls us all, from Brahma down to each blade of grass. He is Time, the Kaalatman. He is the origin and the strength of the body and the mind. He, the master of the gunas, creates, nurtures and destroys us all. I beg you, father, renounce your arrogance and your asuric ways.

Be even-minded, be calm, O Hiranyakashyapu, see all beings with equal sight. There are no friends and foes, but one's Atman everywhere. The only enemy is one's own mind, if it is unrestrained and sinful. The greatest bhakti is to keep the mind calm, and to see God in all beings, friend and foe alike.

There are some that have conquered the ten directions, without conquering the enemies within – the six senses that rob one of the true and greatest wealth: the bliss of the Soul. For the wise man, who has vanquished these six, whose mind is illumined, there are no friends and enemies. Both these are only creations of one's own ignorance."

Hiranyakashyapu hissed, "Fool! You are certainly going to die. Only those whose death is near, talk such nonsense. You speak of this great God of yours. Tell me then, if there is any Lord of the three worlds other than I, your father, where is he?"

Calm as ever, smiling, Prahlada replied, "Why, he is everywhere!"

Hiranyakashyapu glared around him, until his eyes fell on a thick round pillar in the court. He rasped, "Then is he in that pillar also?"

Prahlada looked at the pillar and said, "I see Him there, too."

His father said softly, "Well, I, Hiranyakashyapu, master of the universe, am going to cut off your head. And let your wonderful Vishnu, hiding in the pillar, save you if he can."

The Golden Asura rose from his throne in a flash, his sword glinting blue in his hand. Growling, he stuck the pillar a blow with his fist. A thunderclap rent the air, the palace shook; it seemed the very stars quivered at that sound. Brahma and the Devas, in their lofty realms, heard that sound and thought the end of the worlds had come.

Hiranyakashyapu ignored the sound and, fangs bared, turned on his son. He seized Prahlada and drew back his sword to kill the prince. Then he saw how his court stared in awe and horror at the pillar. Turning, the Asura saw a terrifying sight – something was emerging from the pillar, flowing out from it, as it were. As it came, Hiranya saw that it was neither man nor beast, but both. It was a Manticore: a Man-lion.

Its eyes shone like molten gold. Its face was haloed by golden mane – a lion's savage face, with fangs like daggers and a tongue like a scimitar.

Its ears were a lion's, on top of its head; its mouth and nostrils were like mountain caves, and its cheeks had deep clefts in them, adding to the terror of the Beast.

As the Narasimha emerged, he grew and it seemed that his face was the sun. His neck was thick and short, his chest broad as the world and his waist lean. Hair, like moonrays, covered his body. He had numberless arms and their talons glinted like honed weapons.

Crying out in fear, many sullying themselves, Hiranyakashyapu's bravest Asuras fled their king's sabha. The Golden Demon and the Narasimha faced each other. Though his heart quailed a little, Hiranyakashyapu thought, "This beast is just Vishnu's maya, an illusion. I will see how the creature harms me."

The Asura, who had never been defeated in battle, gave a bloodcurdling roar and, grabbing up a mace, rushed at the Narasimha. As the Demon flew at the Manticore, like a moth at a great flame, the Narasimha's blinding radiance enveloped Hiranya and he was invisible. For, of course, the Beast was Vishnu, the Embodiment of pure sattva, who, at the end of the kalpa, illumines the perfect darkness of tamas, which follows the pralaya, with light from his body.

Hiranyakashyapu struck the Narasimha a blow with his mace of occult power, but the weapon shattered against the hide of the Lord. As Garuda does a serpent, the Manticore seized the Asura in His talons. Hiranya wriggled free as a cobra does from Garuda's clasp. Watching from behind cloud coverings in the sky, the Devas, whom the Demon had dispossessed and driven from their heavens, groaned. Hiranyakashyapu also thought he had triumphed, and that the shining Beast was afraid of him. Now taking up his sword and shield, and roaring lustily, the Asura attacked the Narasimha once more.

The Demon flitted around the Manticore, swiftly as a falcon, to evade the Beast's immense claws. But the Narasimha was quicker than light and, with a shattering roar, seized the Demon again. Hiranyakashyapu struggled to get free, but now he was held firm, like a mouse by a snake.

Now remember the boon Hiranya had from Brahma – *Let me not die by day or by night, on the ground or in the sky, by man or beast. Let no weapon kill me, not inside a dwelling or outside.*

The Manticore, *who was neither man nor beast*, sat on the threshold to Hiranyakashyapu's palace, *not inside or outside a dwelling.* He put the roaring Demon upon his lap, *not on the ground or in the sky.* With his glinting talons, *which were no weapons made by man, Asura or Deva,* he casually tore open the Asura's breast, upon which not even Indra's Vajra could make a scratch. It was the twilight hour, *neither day nor night*. The Asura's blood sprayed across the Man-lion's face and chest, his fur, his mane, colouring them the hue of the setting sun. The Narasimha ripped out Hiranyakashyapu's heart, dripping gore, and swallowed it.

The Narasimha's eyes glittered; he drew out the Golden Demon's entrails and hung them round his neck – macabre garlands. His tongue licked the blood from the corners of his mouth. He was like the lion that has killed a bull elephant, the Lord Vishnu in this fearsome Avatara.

Meanwhile, some of Hiranya's bolder Danavas and Daityas had crept back into the sabha. Casting aside their dead sovereign's corpse, the Beast rose and rushed at them. He chased them out into the streets and, with countless arms, all talonned and deadly, slew thousands of Asuras. His arms flashed, their claws silver lightning and the demons fell around him, headless or their bodies cut in two. The talons went through their flesh like swords through butter.

The Narasimha's mane scattered the clouds in the sky; the rising moon and the setting sun were dimmed by the light streaming from his eyes; he was like another sun erupted from Hiranyakashyapu's palace. His breath stirred the seven seas; hearing his dreadful roars, the diggajas, the elephants that bear the world upon their heads, quailed. The three worlds, akasa, bhumi and patala, trembled to their very cores.

At the Manticore's gigantic tread, mountains were tossed into the air, and his brightness filled the quarters like a thousand suns. His lips quivered in ire, and when he had slain the last demon, he turned back to Hiranyakashyapu's palace and sat upon the dead Asura's throne. His cleft cheeks twitched still – in rage that there was no one left for him to devour.

When they heard that Hari, as the Narasimha, had killed Hiranyakashyapu, the Devastris rained unearthly blooms on him, while their exquisite faces shone with joy. The sky had filled with the vimanas of the Devas and the other immortals. The Devas beat on their biggest drums; the gandharvas sang in celebration and the apsaras danced.

The greatest ones of every race gathered around the Manticore and, palms folded, sang his praises – Brahma was there, Rudra, Indra, his Devas and Lokapalas. The Rishis, the Pitrs, Siddhas, Vidyadharas, Nagas, Manus, Prajapatis, Gandharvas, Asuras, Charanas, Yakshas, Kinnaras and Kimpurushas, Vetalas and Sidheswaras came to the Narasimha. Vishnu's servitors like Sunanda and Kumuda arrived and joined in the general eulogy, extolling his awesome deed.

Brahma sang, "*Na mostmayantaya durantashaktaye, vichitraveeryaya pavitrakarmane. Visravasya sargasthitisamyamaan gunai svaleelaaya sandadhate vyayatmane.*"

I salute You, Boundless One, whose power is limitless, whose prowess is awesome, whose divine play is such that those that hear of it are purified at once! You sport in the creation, nurture and destruction of the cosmos, yet are changeless yourself, even when You manifest yourself as the universe.

Rudra said, "*Kopakaalo yugantaste hato Yamasuro alpaka. Tatsutam pahyupasritam bhaktam te bhaktavatsalam.*"

Friend of your devotees! The time of the Apocalypse is the time for your anger; besides, You have already killed the insignificant demon. Look, your bhakta stands beside You; be his refuge.

Indra said, "Be all our sanctuary, Paramatman. By saving us, you have redeemed the pledge of the havis offered to you. For the offerings made to the Devas are always in fact made to you, O dweller in the hearts of all. The Asura had seized our hearts, the crystal lotuses that belong to you. You have taken them back, Lord, and already they bloom again. Hari, to those that serve you, of what use are the mortal treasures and power of any of the three worlds? Why, your bhaktas don't care for moksha; what then of anything else?"

The Rishis sang, "You have given us knowledge of the way of tapasya, which is part of your great powers – for, with tapasya you created the universe. But the Demon kept us from meditating. Lord, who has assumed this Form of the Narasimha to save dharma, you have liberated the path of dhyana again."

The Pitrs, the ancestors, said, "The Demon seized the offerings our children made to us at their ancestral sraddhas. He took the tarpana they made while they stood in holy waters. You have recovered all this that he swallowed, by tearing out his innards with your claws. We salute the Narasimha, the Lord, protector of dharma."

The Siddhas said, "The Demon weakened our siddhis, our occult powers, by the ferocity of his own. We salute the Lord who tore Hiranyakashyapu's heart out of his chest."

The Vidyadharas said, "We will always worship the Lord who came as the Narasimha and slew the golden demon like an animal. The Asura deprived us of our myriad powers of yoga, with his own."

The great Nagas said, "The Demon took the jewels from our heads and our women too. We bow to the Narasimha, who has restored our serpent wives to us."

The Manus said, "Hiranya desecrated the sacred varna and asrama. We were helpless against his awesome powers. Now you have killed him, Lord, command us, we are your servants for ever."

The Prajapatis said, "Sovereign of all! You created us to be the creators of the races of men. We could not create as long as the Demon ruled. Now he lies dead, his breast torn open. Embodiment of sattva, your Avatara has saved the worlds."

The Gandharvas sang, "We are your singers and dancers, Lord. But the Asura made slaves of us by his dark power. But look at him now; can a man without dharma ever prosper?"

The Charanas said, "Lord of Gods, we seek grace at your lotus feet, which releases jivas from birth and death. We rejoice that the Demon is dead, who tyrannized us seekers after grace."

The Yakshas said, “We were always your main servitors. But the Asura made us his palanquin-bearers. Lord, O Narasimha, master of the twenty-four paths, you saw his sins against the worlds, and now you have set us free.”

The Kimpurushas said, “We are nothing, just little beings. You are the Ultimate One, the Mahapurusha. We can never praise you enough or adequately. Ah, killing this puny demon is no measure of your glory; he was anyway slain the moment the Rishis cursed him.”

Sunanda, Kumuda and Vishnu's other attendants said, “Master, for the first time you have shown us this Form of yours. How wonderful and auspicious this Narasimha is, Lord. And the dead Hiranya is only Vijaya, your own dwarapalaka, cursed by Sanaka and the other Munis. You swore even then that you would be born yourself to kill him. You have kept your word to our friend,”' Narada told Yudhishtira,” said Suka Deva to Parikshit.

THE HYMN OF PRAHLADA

SUKA CONTINUED, "NARADA WENT ON, 'THE NARASIMHA STILL SAT smouldering on dead Hiranyakashyapu's throne. His eyes blazed still, and the wrath in his dreadful and sacred heart burned no less fiercely. Not Brahma or Rudra, not the Devas dared approach him, but sang his praises from a safe distance.

Even the Devi Mahalakshmi, his consort, would not go near the Man-lion, when the Devas begged Her to quieten the Narasimha. Even She had never seen him like this, so terrible.

Then Brahma said to Prahlada, who stood nearby, "Child, try and calm the Lord."

With no hesitation, Prahlada joined his hands together and approached the Narasimha. He prostrated on the floor before the Manticore. When Vishnu, the Beast, saw the boy lying before him his wrath gave way to a surge of love. Tenderly he raised the prince and set his palms on his head, blessing him, filling his young bhakta with ecstasy – the hands that always offer shelter to those that worship Hari, and fear the serpent Time.

The final straggles of darkness left Prahlada's heart, and he saw the Lord, who was the Truth. The boy shook with rapture; tears coursed down his cheek in absolute love. His eyes fixed on the Narasimha's face, his mind perfectly fearless and peaceful, just his voice quivering with bliss, Prahlada began to praise the Lord.

"Though they praise you with a thousand exquisite hymns, not Brahma, the Devas or Rishis have praised you adequately! How then can I, an Asura, my nature tamasic, hope to please you? Indeed, what can please you, O Paramatman? Not wealth, a high birth, beauty, austerity, knowledge of the scriptures, vitality, magnificence, indomitable strength, skill, intelligence, wisdom or meditation. Yet the Lord was pleased with the elephant that had none of these, but had bhakti.

I feel so sure, Lord, that the lowest born man, why from the caste of dogeaters, who has surrendered himself entirely and his life, whatever it may be, to you, is far greater than the brahmana who has all the twelve virtues, but is not dedicated to your holy feet in his heart. The worshipful dogeater purifies his whole tribe, while the brahmana has only pride not real purity.

You, Lord, do not want any man's devotion for your own need. You are perfectly blissful in your own nature. It is from your love for us that you accept our devotion – for whatever a man offers to God returns to him as a thousand blessings. The beauty that a face adds to itself from ornaments only adds to its own reflection in a mirror.

Perhaps, then, Lord, since anyone can worship you, even I, an Asura, am allowed to sing your praises, as best I can. And by this, I shall not add a mite to your eternal glory, but purify myself and free myself from the wheel of samsara.

But look, O Lord, all these that stand terrified by this Form of yours and your anger are your greatest servants – Lord Brahma and the Devas. They are not tamasic as we demons are. They have no reason, being sattvika, to fear you. O Hari, all your Avataras are enchanting and beautiful! They are not meant to cause fear. So, I beg you, curb your anger. My father Hiranyakashyapu is dead and there is no one else here who deserves your wrath.

Even the sagest rejoice when a serpent or a scorpion is killed. All the worlds rejoice at the death of the Monster that tyrannised them for so long. O Narasimha, they are waiting for your fury to abate. From now, let men think upon this Form of yours not to be afraid, but instead to free themselves from fear of evil, from all fear. Lord! As I adore You and only You, I am not afraid of this awesome Form of yours – your fearsome face, tongue like a sword, your eyes that blaze like suns, your twitching brows, your fangs, the garlands you have made of Hiranya's intestines, your mane bright with blood, your ears erect, your roars that make the planets tremble and the Diggajas, your talons, that tore open the Golden Demon's breast.

No, I fear none of these, but I am terrified of samsara, and its torments. Bound by my karma, I have been born into the race of demons, given to violence and savagery. Lord be gracious to me. Call me quickly to live at your holy feet; free me from ignorance forever.

Many times have I been born, in different wombs: each birth has burnt me with its fires. Many lives have I lived, each with its pleasures and pains of union and separation. I have realised that in this world all our efforts to stop pain only create fresh pains. Yet I am fascinated by the darkness that makes the false seem real and reality seem an illusion.

Dear God, give me bhakti, let me become your true servant. O magnificent Narasimha, you are the loved one, the friend and the Lord of us all. If I have your grace, I shall easily transcend these obstacles – my body, my mind and every shackle of limiting nature – if I just sing of your incarnations and your legends. Brahma has sung these songs of praise. If you allow me, so shall I, and then seek the company of the Paramahamsas, the Swan Souls that dwell at your feet.

Without you not perfect morality, penance, austerity or charity is of any consequence. At best they can be brief panaceas for the mortal condition, never a final cure. You are the only Saviour, the only one that can truly set us free. O Narasimha, my sweet Lord, without your blessing and will, its parents cannot protect their child, a boat cannot reach a drowning man, nor the greatest specific cure a sick one.

Everything that exists, by the play of the three gunas, created by Brahma or his creatures, is essentially you. You are the only existence and yours is the only will that moves the universe. Your maya stirs the three gunas, touches time awake. With maya, you the Purusha create the linga sariras, the spirit bodies of the jivas, which survive from birth to birth, carrying their burdens of karma. Vedic rituals, all rituals, only strengthen the hold of the mind, which is the main constituent of the subtle spirit body. The mind's roots are its desires. Why, the mind is this wheel of samsara, of time, of births and deaths.

Eternal One, only those that seek refuge in you free themselves from the wheel of illusion and suffering. Omnipotent, omniscient Lord, you are the Self-illumined consciousness, singular and undivided. You transcend the gunas of Prakriti, and all that they create. You manifest as Time, Kaala, which controls and regulates the worlds and forces, the beings and objects of nature. Lord, your wheel of samsara, of the sixteen terrible spokes, crushes me like a cane of sugar, again and again. I beg you, Narasimha, O Hari, draw me away from the wheel and towards yourself.

Lord, many times have I been born and have died. All that other men long for – a long life, wealth and the blessings of the Devas and Lokapalas – I have seen enough of these, and I know they are all transient and finally fruitless. Why, the Lokapalas trembled if my father merely knit his brow. How he used to laugh in their faces when he was angry. But you, Lord: how effortlessly you slew that father of mine, the peerless Hiranyakashyapu. Before you, he was nothing.

So what use are all the siddhis and every other material possession and power that men strive so hard for? What point sensual pleasure, limitless power, wealth and majesty? Look at my father who had all these, for which every being, from Brahma down to the lowest creature, is so greedy. Lord, I do not crave any boon, which you, as Time, will destroy.

I beg you, my God, lead me to the company of those that worship and seek only you. Lead me away from the mirages of this world, away from the body which enjoys and suffers the mirages – this thing that will be food for worms, which is already a potential home for every sickness that stalks the earth. I marvel that there are intelligent men everywhere, who know all this, and still they chase after their desires, avidly, trying in vain to put out their dreadful conflagrations with the droplets of pleasure's honey, which are so hard won!"

Prahlada paused, as fervently as he spoke, then, continued softly, intensely, "Who am I, born into the race of Asuras, its roots plunged in the rajoguna, its life overshadowed by tamas, that I deserve your grace? Yet, Almighty One, you set your hands on my worthless head, blessing me! Which, O Narasimha, you did not do to Brahma, Rudra or even the Devi Lakshmi. It seems, You, the Creator, the final Arbiter, the Soul of the worlds, do not look upon any creature as superior to another, as we mortal beings do. It seems that anyone who worships you, O greatest Kalpavriksha, shall eat your immortal fruit. It seems that bhakti and service are all that you ask.

Lord, I will never abandon serving your Sages, for, I would have fallen into the deepest pit of samsara, except that Narada Muni saved me from danger when I was still in my mother's womb. I owe a Maharishi everything that I am today; I owe Brahma's great son my very bhakti, more precious to me than my life.

Lord, I do believe that it was to give veracity to the teachings of Mahatmas like Sanaka, Sanananda and the others that you have incarnated here today, to kill my father who said, 'Let me see which Ishwara other than me there is, who comes to save you. For I mean to cut off your head now!'

You, the One, have manifested as the myriad universe. You are before the universe was made, and you shall be after it is dissolved, always unchanged. And while the universe exists for its Manvantaras and Kalpas, you shall be, as well, as ever, detached, immaculate, unaffected. Yes, you are the cause of this Akhanda and its manifestation, too. Yet, you are distinct from and transcend the universe, because you remain as you were before the transient universe was created, while it exists, and after it is no more.

For the man that sees this final unity, which you are, how can there be any meaning to the 'mine' and the 'yours', as we encounter it daily in the material world? The Spirit of which we are all made, the Holy Seed, appears as many, but remains one and undivided. Then, again, you withdraw the manifest universe into yourself. You shut your eyes in inner communion, dispelling the darkness of sleep in perfectly pure consciousness. You lie upon the Ekarnava, the cosmic waters, upon your Serpent bed, in the state the wise call Turiya, the Fourth Condition – neither awake, nor asleep, nor dreaming the universe anymore.

The universe is your sthula rupa, your gross form. Like a vast banyan tree emerging from its latent seed, the universe emerges from you, Lord. It sprouts and grows as the Cosmic Lotus when, through the Kaalatman you stir Prakriti, Cosmic Nature, awake again, upon awakening yourself from the mahasamadhi of Turiya. You still lie upon your infinite Serpent bed, Ananta, upon the single and undivided sea.

Brahma is born within the Lotus that sprouts from your navel, O Mahavishnu! He looks around him and finds nothing except the Lotus of his birth. He cannot find its source. For a hundred divine years, Brahma seeks the source of the Lotus in the cosmic waters, in vain. Then, he sits perplexed again inside the great bloom, and begins a deep dhyana. When his mind is purified, then, O Hari, he becomes aware of your presence within himself, in his own heart. He realises the elements, the senses, the mind and the intellect, even as a yogi scents the sacred smell of the earth upon which he sits.

Brahma then sees you, the Cosmic Being, the Paramatman, with thousands of faces, arms, feet, hands, legs, eyes, ornaments and weapons. Each limb of yours, Lord, Brahma sees is a zone of the endless universe."

Prahlada paused again. The Narasimha was very quiet.

The prince continued, as softly as before, "You came as the horse-headed Hayagriva to kill Madhu and Kaitabha, who were embodiments of rajas and tamas. You retrieved the Vedas they had stolen and gave them back to Brahma. Hayagriva was pure sattva, and the Rishis all say it is your favourite Avatara, and that meditating upon Him brings gyana as no other contemplation.

In different yugas, you come as Man, Beast, Fish, Muni and Deva, to kill Evil Ones and restore dharma in the world. You protect dharma in every age; yet in the kali yuga you remain hidden, as though you were not there at all, and sattva were truly overwhelmed by the darker gunas. For that, you are called Triyuga – he that incarnates himself in three ages.

Oh my God of Vaikuntha, evil corrupts my mind and draws it out to the samsara and its objects. Flaming lust has its way with my mind, as do sorrow and joy, fear and the obsessive desire for children, wealth and fame.

Being bound with these shackles, my heart does not soar free to delight in you, and the legends of you that are everywhere, why, that are this universe. I am full of darkness, Lord, how will I pursue my quest for You? How will I find your feet forever?

Immaculate Achyuta, my sense of taste, always greedy, drags me in one direction, the lust in my loins in another. Hunger, hearing and smell haul me this way and that, while the fickle sense of sight and the vigorous limbs of actions impel me in other directions still, until, I am pulled in shreds by their ceaseless clamour, even as a husband is by the demands of his many wives. And sadly, O Hari, I have no natural sense that draws me as potently towards you!

Ah, my God, look at us jivas fallen into this hellish Vaitarini, this uncrossable river of samsara, by the inexorable power of our karma. We struggle to stay afloat amidst adverse and chaotic currents, whirlpools of fear of death and life; and also the gentler eddies of pleasure, for which we compete fiercely. See us, Lord, engulfed in this competition and animosity, as also in affection and attachment, all of which are the illusions of the river of hell.

And you dwell across the river! Have mercy on me, Vishnu, take me to your immortal bank. O Father, Guru of us all, who create, sustain and destroy all the galaxies, why is it so hard for you to save us insignificant creatures from the river of illusions and torment? No, Lord, it is not hard for you; it is proper that you save us! For I have heard that you are gracious to the ignorant and Dinabandhu, a friend of the sick and the afflicted, as we jivas are, every one. What point if your grace is confined to those that least need it – the holy ones, the Rishis that already serve you, your bhaktas? Grace is most auspicious if it is given to the least deserving!"

Impassioned now, the young prince said, "Drown me in the river of hell, Lord, as long as my mind is drowned in the amrita sagara of the songs of your lila, your incarnations and legends. I grieve for the ignorant, O God, that leave the path of bhakti, who for the sake of fleeting and insubstantial pleasures, shoulder the black burden of the material life.

Hari, Munis usually strive only for their own moksha. They sit in solitude, in dhyana, with no thought for anyone else. Let me not become like that, O Narasimha, for I do not seek just my own salvation, while I see my fellow jivas plunged in the sea of samsara all around me, sunk in misery. You are their only sanctuary, their only hope. Lord, if you are ever pleased to rescue me from the sea of hell, I pray that I am strong enough to accept your nirvana only if all those that suffer around me are saved as well.

How small, how insignificant are the pleasures of sexual intercourse and the other brief enjoyments available to the grihasta. Yet, as scratching a hand that itches only aggravates the itch, indulging these only increases their hold over the mind, the stranglehold of lust. The lustful are never satisfied scratching their particular itch, Lord, despite all the sorrows that accrue from it.

Sometimes, very rarely, a wise man escapes the itch – but only by your grace, when you remove lust itself from his mind. For those that have not mastered their senses, the itch of desire, every other achievement of theirs is no more than a hypocrite's pretence: with the only aim of earning a livelihood, at which, also, they seldom succeed. What real use to them are the keeping of silence or vows, the loftiest scholarship, every austerity, reciting the Vedas, doing their dharma perfectly, preaching, teaching, living solitary lives, repeating mantras or daily meditation?

The Vedas say that, like the seed and the tree, you are also found in two conditions – as the Cause of the teeming universe and as the indweller, the Antarayamin, in everything that exists. You, the Formless Brahman, cannot be imagined in any other manner. Like arani twigs being rubbed together to ignite the latent fire in them, your bhaktas practise communing with you, by prayer, by meditation. There is no other way.

You are fire, air, earth, sky, the subtle elements, the tanmatras, vital energy, the senses, mind, consciousness, ego and all the Gods. You are everything that is material and spiritual, sthula and sukshma. No thing of which mind can think or speech speak is apart from you. No creature circumscribed by Prakriti can truly know you, because we are all mortal, finite – limited by a beginning and an end. The wise, who realise this, renounce all selfish attempts to gain or fathom you, like the study of the Vedas or the Vedanta, but only try to surrender to your grace.

Lord, without the six-limbed devotion – of salutation, praise, the dedication of all karma, hearing, service and the remembrance of your many lilas – how will bhakti take root in the heart and sprout in our mind? The constant love of you, which is the goal of all the Paramahamsas. Scholarship cannot generate that condition of abandon," said Prahlada, lying on his face at the Lord's feet still.

The Manticore, the Lord Himself, grew calm now. So very gently, Its voice full of a transcendent love, the Narasimha said to the prostrate prince, "Prahlada, may all that is auspicious happen to you, O best of all Asuras! I am delighted with you and love you, more than even you know. Ask me whatever you want, I will give you anything at all. No one that has not worshipped me truly in his heart can ever see me. And he that sees me once shall never feel again that he has any desires that have not been fulfilled. The Rishis are not fools that they worship me! For I am he that bestows all things that men seek. Ask me, O Prince, for anything your heart desires, any boon at all," said the awesome Avatara, seated on Hiranyakashyapu's throne, while that Demon lay torn upon the threshold of his palace,' said Narada Muni to Yudhishtira," Suka said to Parikshit.

THE STORY OF PRAHLADA

"NARADA CONTINUED, 'PRAHLADA, WHOSE HEART WELLED WITH truth, smiled radiantly, full of joy that his God sat before him. The prince said, "I beg you, sweet Lord, do not tempt me with boons, for being an Asura I am naturally inclined to indulge my senses. Material boons are the seed of samsara. I am terrified of becoming entangled in the snares of lust and desire. I want only to be free, O Hari, and to come to your holy feet.

Lord, one who worships you to have boons is no true bhakta. He is only a tradesman, who masquerades as a worshipper. The servant that serves only to benefit himself is neither loyal nor true; he has no love in his heart. The master that shows his favour to his servant only to have service from him is as untrue. Lord, I want to be your servant, with no ulterior motive but to be pure and loving to you, my only joy to serve you. You, Master of all, are perfect and have no need of my service. Unlike an earthly king and his servants, you and I, Lord, have no ulterior motive to come together.

Yet, I am your servant and, in your infinite mercy, you have said that you will give me any boon I want. So, O Mahavishnu, I will ask for just one boon from you – that no desire for any boon ever rises in my heart. When desires rise up in a mind, they destroy the mind's nobler faculties, even as weeds choke a fine plant. They ruin the strength of a man: his senses, his intellect, his dharma, his determination, understanding, his fortune, modesty, his prowess, his memory and his truth.

Lotus-eyed, only when a jiva relinquishes his every desire does he become fit for moksha, to truly worship you. I salute you, my God, who have come to me in this incomprehensibly beautiful Narasimha Rupa. I am prostrate before you, O Paramatman, who own every divine majesty, Antarayamin, Mahatman, O Parabrahman!"

Beaming, the Manticore said slowly, "I know that bhaktas like you do not long for any joys, in this world or the next. Yet, Prahlada, I bless you that for a Manvantara you shall be Emperor of the race of Asuras, and have the position and power that go with that sovereignty.

My child, always listen to my Purana, install me in your heart: I who am already there – the indweller in every being, the one that brings the fruit of every yagna. Worship me, prince, by surrendering all your karma, you very life to me, whatever it turn out to be, whatever paths it meanders down. For when you offer me your life, your heart and your deeds, karma will not bind you anymore. It loses that power, as a fried grain loses its power to germinate.

Consume your punya by enjoying its fruit; make ashes of your sins by doing good deeds, more punya. Let time's passage consume your body naturally. Your fame for being a bhakta and a king of dharma shall spread through the three worlds, even into Devaloka. Finally, with the last bonds of samsara broken, you will attain my Being, and be forever free. Why, Prahlada, let any man but tell or listen to this story of you and me, and he shall, in time, have his karma taken from him and have moksha."

Prahlada said, "Lord of Gods, there is yet a favour I want from you."

"Whatever it be, you shall have," said the Narasimha.

"Without knowing you, my father always thought of you as his brother's killer, and he hated you all his life. Because I loved you, he tormented me and tried to kill me. Lord, there shall be no salvation for Hiranyakashyapu, except through your grace. Most likely, even when you looked at him, he was purified. But I did love my father, O Hari, and I am anxious for him. I beg you, save his soul from damnation."

The Manticore laughed softly, and what a great and lovely sound that was. The Narasimha said, "Not just your father, but twenty-one generations of his ancestors have been purified because you, O devout and wonderful prince, have been born into this line. Where my bhaktas stay, they purify the people and places around them, even if those are as degenerate as the land of the Kikatas and that race.

Those that do no harm to any living being, who have lost all their worldly desires because their minds are absorbed in me – these are my greatest bhaktas and they certainly purify any place they visit or live in. And I say, Prahlada, from now you shall be known as the greatest of those bhaktas; you shall be the mean by which the rest are measured."

That Being, the Lord, paused, then continued, "Now go and cremate your father's body and perform the last rites for him. Do not worry, Hiranyakashyapu was saved when I killed him. Having a son like you is by itself an assurance that he shall find heaven for himself.

And now you must sit upon this throne of your father's, and with your mind surrendered to me, perform your dharma as king, with the counsel of Rishis that know the Vedas." '

Narada paused, while Yudhishtira sat in thrall of the legend he told, then went on, 'Prahlada performed the last rites for Hiranyakashyapu and he was crowned king by the priests of his father's kingdom.

Now Brahma and the Devas saw the Narasimha was calm, and approached him singing his praises.

Brahma said, "*Devadeva Akhiladhyaksha, bhuta bhavana purvaja.* Lord of Gods, Master of the universe, who existed before all things. The worlds are fortunate that you have slain the Demon, who was a sinner and spread misery throughout creation. With the boons he had from me, no one could kill him and he did as he pleased and ravaged dharma everywhere. Why, he made sin the virtue of the day; and virtue, sin. But his own son is your bhakta and for Prahlada's sake, you have freed the worlds of the terror of Hiranyakashyapu. Lord, may this awesome Form of yours free any man that meditates upon it of his every sin. May it set him free from the bonds of karma and save him from death."

Gently, the Narasimha chided the Creator of the worlds. "O Lotus-born, you should not grant such boons to the Asuras. For, giving limitless power to those that are naturally cruel, is like feeding amrita to a serpent. It can only increase the troubles of the world, and with demons like Hiranyakashyapu's, immeasurably."

With that, as suddenly as He had emerged from the pillar, the Narasimha vanished.

Now Prahlada prostrated before the other Gods, Brahma, Bhava, the Prajapatis, Indra's Devas, all of whom were amsas of Mahavishnu. Brahma, Sukra Bhargava and the other celestial ones proclaimed that Prahlada was Emperor of the Daityas and Danavas. They blessed him and he, in turn, offered them worship, after which they returned to their unearthly abodes.

So it was, Yudhishtira, that Vishnu's dwarapalakas, Jaya and Vijaya, became Asuras, by the curse of Sanaka and the other Rishis. The Lord manifested in two Avataras apposite to their hatred and confrontation, and he killed them, saved them.

Later, the two servitors were born in the treta yuga as two Rakshasas – the ten-headed Ravana and his titanic brother Kumbhakarna. Now, Vishnu incarnated as a perfect kshatriya – Rama of the House of the Sun – and killed them, delivered them from their sin of hubris yet again. As in their birth as Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashyapu, the two Rakshasas also died thinking of Hari's Avatara who killed them.

In the final birth of the curse, the two were born in the dwapara yuga as Sishupala and Dantavakra, and you have seen with your own eyes today, O Yudhishtira, how they have died at the hands of our Lord Hari come now as dark Krishna. As so many other demonic kings of this age, they, too, have attained moksha by their obsessive hatred and fear of Krishna, by dying at his hands. Even as the great bhaktas of other ages fixed their minds one-pointedly upon the Blue God, with dhyana, these kings of our time attained the same union and fixity of thought by their enmity and hatred. They, also, have become one with him. So it is, Pandava, that the Lord's greatest enemies find union with him: because their fervour and obsession with him is no less than that of his finest devotees.

The tale of Prahlada, prince of the Asuras, tells of the three paths of the Bhagavatas, which bestow moksha – bhakti, gyana and virakti, which is dispassion. Whoever listens to this legend of the Narasimha Avatara of the Lord with devotion is surely liberated from the shackles of karma. He arrives at the condition where fear does not exist anymore, the place beyond death.

Pandavas, you are the most fortunate men, for here the Brahman Himself lives among you – Krishna, who is God come now as a man, your cousin. The most profound Rishis from across the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha flock here to see him, and their presence, too, is another blessing for you. Why, this Krishna is the One whom every soul seeks, who treads the path towards nirvana. And here he is among you, playing many roles: as your friend, your cousin, your Guru, your servant, why, your very self!

Not Brahma or Rudra have fathomed the true Form of this God that is here with you. May he bless us all! Do you know, Yudhishtira, the Lord Vishnu restored great Siva's reputation, when the Asura Mayaa, master of occult siddhis, damaged it once?'

Yudhishtira wanted to know, 'How did Mayaa darken Mahadeva's good name? How did Narayana restore it?'

Narada said, 'Once, two yugas ago, led by Siva's son Kumara, the Devas vanquished the Asuras, whose king was the matchless Taraka. The demons fled in every direction and were homeless, like beggars in the world. After aeons of privation and suffering, they heard of a new Asura leader risen through his intense tapasya and they streamed to him from across the three realms.

This was Mayaa, master builder of their race, awesome warrior, master of dhyana, who had Brahma's boon. He built three fortress-like cities for his people and they crowned him their emperor. Brahma's boon to him was that his three cities could fly through the air, invisibly when he chose, and that he and his people would be invincible within the cities' walls.

Mayaa built those cities with deep genius and the powers that Brahma had given him. They were replete with magnificent palaces, mansions and gardens, gold and jewels beyond compare and other marvels that are past describing. There were three cities, one of gold, one of silver and the last of bronze. Mayaa himself ruled the golden city and his brothers ruled the other two, in his name.

The Asuras had not forgotten their years in the wilderness and how the Devas had hunted, humiliated and killed them. Now, in their invisible cities they flew here and there, across the worlds and took revenge as they pleased. They were invincible inside their Tripura, and the Devas helpless against their depredations.

The Devas and Lokapalas came to Rudra and prayed, "Immanent One! The Asuras of the Tripuras have almost destroyed us. We beg you, Rudra, save us from Mayaa."

Rudra reassured the gods, and picking up his bow, shot an apocalyptic arrow at the cities of the air. From that single shaft, millions issued, blazing many fires, brilliant as sunrays, and pierced the demon cities. The lustre of those shafts eclipsed the Tripura. Every Asura within Mayaa's cities fell dead, for there was an arrow for each one.

But Mayaa himself was such a great Sivabhakta that he did not die. With his magical powers, he brought his legion dead to the pool of amrita, at the gates of his golden city. He chanted great mantras over them and the moment the nectar spray touched the dead demons they revived and sprang up like bolts of lightning from the clouds. Now their bodies were like gleaming iron.

Vishnu saw Siva disconsolate because of what had happened, and thought he knew how to help the Lord of Kailasa. The Blue God assumed the form of a cow and Brahma became his calf. At high noon one day they came to the pool of amrita outside Mayaa's city and drained it off. The demon guards saw what the bright cow and her young one were doing, but, entranced by a spell that Vishnu cast over them, they merely watched and did not attack the two shining animals.

Vishnu and Brahma drained that pool and vanished. Waking from their trance, the guardians of the pool came wailing to their master. Mayaa was among the wisest of the wise and he knew a divine will nestled at the heart of everything that happened in time.

The Demon Emperor consoled his sorrowing soldiers, "Not the Devas, Asuras or men can change the fate that rules our lives, from their first moment to their last – our pleasures and suffering: all of it is by the divine will."

Later, Vishnu and Brahma created a mighty astra for Siva. They created a transcendent vimana, which embodied the virtues, dharma, gyana, viraka and the rest. They made and gave Rudra a bow, armour and other weapons, a charioteer and a flagstaff bearing the emblem of the Virshabha, the Bull.

Siva climbed into the vimana and was ready for battle. At the auspicious hour of abhijita, noon, Rudra shot his astra at the Tripura and consumed them in a flash of fire. Drumrolls sounded across the sky, and the Devas that had gathered in their own invisible sky-chariots cried out his praises. They flung torrents of unearthly flowers down on Rudra; Gandharvas sang and Apsaras danced on air. Vishnu, Rudra and Brahma returned to their homes.'

Narada paused, smiling, then said, 'Now what would you like to hear, Yudhishtira Dharmaputra, O king without an equal?'

THE VARNAS OF MEN AND THEIR DHARMA

SUKA WENT ON, "DELIGHTED NO END BY THE LEGEND OF PRAHLADA, Yudhishtira now asked, 'Munivara, I want to hear all about the Sanatana Dharma of man, the way of living by the laws of the varnas and their asramas, by which I have heard a man comes to gyana and bhakti. Lord, you are Brahma's own son and among all his sons you are known for your bhakti, your tapasya and your samadhi, your communion with Hari. Only men like you, who are perfectly devoted to Narayana, who treat the world and everything in them as your own self, find perfect peace of mind.'

Narada said, 'I salute the Paramatman, the birthless, deathless One, before I tell you about the Sanatana Dharma: why, as I heard it from Vishnu himself. Do you know, O Pandava, that the Lord incarnated himself in amsa as a twin incarnation, Nara Narayana? He was born as the son of Dharma Prajapati and his wife Murti Devi. Even today, he lives in the twin Avatara upon sacred Badarikasrama on Mount Gandhamadana.

Vishnu is the embodiment of all the Gods, high and low; He is the font of dharma. Of course, the Rishis – who have been illumined by truth – are also considered authorities on dharma. And yes, by living in dharma, man comes to peace and light.

There are thirty virtues, by which if a man lives, with humility in his heart, he finds God's grace.

Satyam, daya, tapa, showcham, thithikshekşha, kshamo, damah;
Ahimsa brahmacharyam tyagam svadhyayah aarjavam;
Santosha samadrik seva gramyehoparamah shanai;
Nrinaam, viparyeheksha mownam atmavimsharnam;
Annadyadehah smavibhago bhutebhasva yathahritah;
Teshva Atmadevatabuddhih sutaram nrishu, Pandava;
Shravanam kirtanam chasya smaranam mahataam gatheh;
Sevejya vantirdasyam sakhayam atmasamarpanam;
Nrinamayam prodharmah sarvesham samudahritam;
Trimshallakshanavaan rajan sarvatma yena tushyati;
Samskaara yadavichchinah sa dvijo ajo jagaad yam;
Ijyadhyayana daanani vihitaani dvijanmanaam.

Truth, compassion, austerity, purity, forbearance, discrimination, control of mind, of the senses; non-violence, continence, charity, study of the scriptures, integrity; contentment, service of Sages, slow withdrawal from deeds and rituals with a selfish motive, readiness to meet failure and disappointment; silence; giving food to living beings as they deserve, self criticism, seeing God everywhere, especially in man, the practice of the purest way of life that holy men follow – by listening, hymning, remembrance, worship, salutation, dedicating all one's karma to Him, friendship with Him; and finally, complete surrender.

A dvija, a twice-born, is one for whom the sixteen rites of purification have been performed without a break since his conception, and he is called that name in the Veda: a Brahmana. All brahmanas, who are pure by birth and by deed, are expected to perform yagnas, study the Veda, to give gifts, and also to live by the dharma of the stage of life, the asrama, in which they find themselves.

A brahmana has six duties: studying the Veda, teaching it, conducting yagnas for those that want them, giving charity and receiving it as their livelihood.

The kshatriya has all these as part of his dharma, too, except he does not receive charity, only gives. However, his main dharma is to rule the land and protect the people. To keep this dharma, he may collect taxes from everyone, except the brahmanas. These shall constitute his living. When danger threatens, he might also teach the Veda and officiate as a priest to feed and keep himself.

The vaisya's dharma is agriculture and trade, and he must live by the laws laid down for him by the brahmanas. The sudra must serve the twice-born, and lives from the income his masters give him.

The brahmana can also make his living by farming, keeping cows, unsolicited gifts, begging alms and collecting clean grain and food that have fallen or been discarded in a field or marketplace. In ordinary times, of peace, no man of a lower varna should do the work of the higher varnas. The kshatriya is the exception. In times of danger, or war, anyone may take up any means to earn his living.

In such extraordinary times, any man can feed himself by rita, amrita, mrita, pramrita or satyanrita; but never by bestial svavritti. Rita is collecting grain from the field; amrita is gifts received without begging for them; mrita is daily alms; pramrita is food got from farming, and satyanrita is income from trade. But svavritti is the service of people of low and abominable origins, and no brahmana or kshatriya should ever stoop to this way, known as the dog's way, too. For, a brahmana is a home of the sacred Veda and the kshatriya of all the Devas.

The qualities of a brahmana are restraint of the senses and the mind, austerity, contentment, patience, truthfulness, knowledge, kindness, devotion to God and to the truth.

A kshatriya is heroic, valiant, possesses fortitude, impressiveness, the spirit of sacrifice, self-control, and patience. He is devoted to holy men, always optimistic, and ready to risk his life to protect the weak.

The vaisya is devoted to the Devas, to his Gurus and to Vishnu. His main effort is to make all the money he can and to enjoy it and every pleasure that life has to offer. He is faithful to God and to the Veda, perseveres under any trying circumstance, and has great professional skill.

The sudra is humble, pure, straightforward, and serves his master loyally. He performs the five-fold worship, but without offering mantras, only prostrating. He never steals or lies, and cares for brahmanas and their gentle and sacred cows.'

Narada paused, and Yudhishtira asked him, 'My lord, what about women? What is their dharma?'

Brahma's son, the wanderer, said, 'A pativrata, a devoted wife's, dharma is to serve her husband, doing everything he asks her to, serving his close family, keeping the vows he does. She must, at all times, be clean and make herself appealing for her husband; she must keep her home clean, the kitchen and what it contains, decorate the housefront with fine designs in coloured powder.

Most of all, she must always please her man with what he likes: by her modesty, restraint, truth, soft and agreeable speech, and, of course, with love and lovemaking. She must be contented, for without that the home is ruined. She must be chaste, and firmly entrenched in dharma. She must follow and help her husband always, except when he falls to evil ways.

A wife that adores her husband as Lakshmi does Hari will, after she dies, find, with her man, the bliss of Sri Lakshmi herself, when she is with Vishnu.'

'What of those that are outside the varna, O Narada?'

'Their dharma is determined by the customs of their tribes. These may be people of mixed varnas, or castes outside the four varnas, or those that live beyond our civilisation. Of course, tribes of brigands and murderers must be put down severely.

Kshatriya, through the yugas, the greatest Rishis have said that the best course for any man is to follow swadharma, his own dharma, determined by the mix of sattva, rajas and tamas in him. He that follows the dharma that his svabhava, his innate nature, dictates, shall not be bound by his karma, and will finally be set free from the bondage of the gunas, and gyana and bhakti will awaken in him.

The jiva is like a field that is ploughed and sown, again and again, until it becomes barren. Now, no seed sown in it will germinate. So, too, the mind, which is the field of desires, can become dispassionate by excessive indulgence in pleasure. Such pleasure finally weans the jiva away from desire itself, and he sets out to seek the truth buried in his heart. Birth is important – for, what is right for one man might be dangerous for another. Thus, a man should always follow the promptings of his own inner nature and compulsions. Indeed, if a brahmana displays the characteristics of a kshatriya, a vaisya or sudra, so he should be called, for so in truth he is.'

THE DHARMA OF BRAHMACHARINS AND VANAPRASTHAS

NARADA CONTINUED, 'A BRAHMACHARIN MUST LIVE IN HIS GURU'S asrama. He must strictly control his senses, always obey his master unquestioningly, be humble before him, why, like a servant, and absolutely loving. Morning and evening, he must attend on his master. During the three sandhyas, dawn, noon and dusk, he should chant the Gayatri mantra and worship his gurus, Agni, Surya and the main Devas. At the sandhya rituals of dawn and dusk, he must keep silence and chant and meditate upon the holy Gayatri.

He must study the Veda whenever his Guru is free to instruct him. Before the instruction begins and when it ends, he prostrates himself before his preceptor. As the scriptures prescribe, he wears deerskin, his hair in jata, the sacred thread around his body. He holds darbha grass in his hand, and has a staff and kamandalu.

Morning and evening, he is allowed to go out to gather food as alms. First, he must offer what he receives to his master. Only when his Guru allows him should he eat himself. On the days the master does not explicitly say that he might eat, the brahmacharin must fast.

The sishya is always well mannered, moderate in what he eats, skilful, full of faith and restrained in every way. Only if he is forced to, must he even speak to women, or for that matter, even to men that live with women. Of the asramas, only the grihastha, the householder, should hear or read songs or poetry dealing with romantic love. The rest that observe continence must avoid such art, for they can disturb the senses of even the most restrained yogin, and the senses can subvert the mind to thoughts of carnal pleasure. Powerful are the senses and the mind.

The brahmacharin never allows the Guru's wife or any young woman to bathe him, clothe him, massage his body with oil or comb his hair. It is told that a woman is like fire and man a pot of ghee! When they come too close, they ignite. The Munis have said that a celibate vanaprastha should avoid meeting his own daughter alone. Even when there are others about, such meetings must be few and brief. Once the world is renounced, one should not look back at its attachments. However learned or wise a man is, this final temptation, the gravest danger, always remains a mortal threat and he had best avoid it or it can cause his spiritual downfall.

The laws of conduct and the virtues that apply to brahmacharins do so to grihasthas and Sannyasins as well, as do the mental disciplines. But the householder, the family man, need go to and serve his Guru only occasionally, and he does cohabit with his wife at the times when he is allowed, when she does not have her period.

But the brahmacharin, the celibate in the house of his Guru, is strictly forbidden oil baths, massages, meat of any kind, drink or any other intoxicant, the company of women, drawing or looking at women, or their pictures even, wearing garlands or other sensuous inclinations. His only commitment must be to the study of the Veda and the Upanishads, and reflecting upon these scriptures. He must give his all to this study, according to his own capacity.

Once his tutelage is complete, and before he marries and embarks on the life of a householder, or of a vanaprastha, as the case might be, he must give a final gift of parting to his master: his gurudakshina. If he is an exceptionally evolved student, and ready for renunciation, he might even become a Sannyasin, missing the other two asramas. The other alternative is for him to remain throughout his life in his Guru's home as a brahmacharin.

God transcends everything in the material and even the spiritual world. Yet, the seeker must think of Him as being embodied in the Guru, in agni, in his own heart and in all beings. The man that lives his life thus, seeing Vishnu as being pervasive, will come to illumination and the Brahman, be he a brahmacharin, a vanaprastha or a Sannyasin.'

Narada drew a breath; then, radiant as ever, said, 'Yudhishtira would you hear the dharma of a vanaprastha now, as the Maharishis of yore ordained it to be?'

Yudhishtira bowed deeply, smiling in joy, to say that indeed he would.

The Muni began, 'The vanaprastha, the anchorite who lives in the forest, finds Maharloka quite easily, if he follows this dharma.

He should not eat grain or any food that comes from farming. He should not eat fruit before they are ripe; and then only those from trees that have grown wild, and not been planted by men. He should not eat anything burnt by fire, nor what is raw. He can eat fruit ripened by the heat of the sun.

He must perform the daily yagnas, with charu and purodasa, made from wild cereals of the jungle. As he finds new fruit, he must throw away any old ones he has. He must live bared to the elements – wind, rain, heat, cold, even fire. He must keep a cave-dwelling upon a mountain, or wherever he lives – its only purpose being to keep his sacred agni burning.

He must wear his hair in jata, not cut his beard or nails, and his physical appearance must be untended and wild. He should carry a kamandalu, some hide to sit upon in dhyana, valkala to wear and whatever he needs to kindle and worship the agni. He must live in the forest for twelve, eight, four or two years, as long as he can without injuring his mental strength.

When he is too old or too infirm to continue performing his ordained dharma, or of pursuing the disciples of gyana, he should fast unto death. There is a definite procedure laid down for the final fast. The vanaprastha first withdraws the three fires into his inner self. He begins with ahavaniya, renouncing his identification with his body. He allows the psychophysical organism, which is the body, to be absorbed into the causal elements of which it is formed: the gross elements into tanmatras, the senses into raajasikahamkara, and the mind into sattvikahamkara.

The hermit dissolves the space that the bodily orifices contain into cosmic akasa; he gives his breath up into air, his digestion into fire, his blood, phlegm, urine and other fluids into water, and all the rest, the solids, into earth.

The mouth and tongue he gives to Agni Deva, his hands and their function to Indra, his legs and their locomotion to Vishnu, and his penis and its generative power to Prajapati. His anus he relinquishes to Mrityu, his ears and his hearing to Diti, his skin and touch to Vayu.

Yudhishtira, the yogi renounces his eyes and sight to Aditya Deva, his tongue and taste he melts into Varuna and water, his nose and sense of scent to the Aswini Kumaras and the element earth. His mind, with its imagination and faculty of doubt, he gives up to Soma Deva, the Moon, to whom they belong. His intellect, buddhi, he abandons to Brahma from whom it came; his ahamkara to Rudra; his chitta, consciousness in kshetrajna, his jiva, his individual soul, (and that soul now freed from its bonds), in the Paramatman, the Supreme Soul.

Prithvi, the element earth, is dissolved in apah, water; apah in tejas, fire; tejas in vayu, air; vayu in akasa, the sky; akasa in ahamkara, the sense of self; ahamkara in mahatattva the cosmic I; mahatattva in pradhana, the primal root of matter, and pradhana in God.

What remains is only the Atman, pure consciousness. He is immortal, single, undivided. Now there remains no further quest: like the flame that dies out when its fuel is consumed,' said Narada."

THE SANNYASI'S WAY

SUKA CONTINUED, "NARADA SAID, 'IF THE VANAPRASTHA IS NOT TOO old or too ill, he must not fast until he passes on, but live the Sannyasi's life. He resolves all his karma, his very being, into his Soul, and then wanders the earth with no destination, seeing God everywhere he goes.

He bears only his body, stops in no village for more than one day and relies on no one for anything. If he must wear something on his body, he does a kaupina, a codpiece, and nothing more. Only when danger threatens will he take up anything that he renounced when he became a Sannyasi. He may carry a waterpot made of shell and a staff. He roams the world alone, companionless except for the Atman, absorbed in the Atman, a friend to all the living, but depending on none, abandoned only to Vishnu, the only real support.

He sees the world as being founded in the Paramatman, God who is yet always transcendent, and unaffected by anything that happens in the world. The wandering ascetic sees only the Soul in all karma, all causes and effects, as the immanent principle: the Atman that is not apart from the Final Un-born Brahman, the Cause of causes.

Pandava, between waking and sleep, there is another state, a cusp, which is neither of those, yet is both as well. So, too, the Sannyasi sees the Soul in both bondage and freedom. He is indifferent to the death of his body, for it is inevitable whether he cares for it or not. He is indifferent to prolonging this life, which is fundamentally ephemeral, insecure. He thinks of Kaala, great Time, which is God Himself, who forever emanates and devours all the worlds and whatever is in them.

A Sannyasi never studies subjects that do not deal with the spirit. He never takes up an occupation merely for his livelihood. He avoids sophists and mere scholars, who argue for argument's sake. He takes no sides in any controversy, never strives to attract disciples and followers. The study of too many books is not for him. He does not speak for the sake of being recognised, nor does he embark on any new ventures, such as setting up asramas.

For a truly great Sage, who has found the light within, the life in an asrama and its disciplines cease to have any meaning or purpose. He can take it or leave it; it makes no difference to him.

The great seer does not appear especially distinguished in any way except for his palpable spiritual aura. He is truly a wise one, but appears like a child or a drunk even. He will brim with inspiration and grace, but seem naïve, as well.'

Narada paused now, and Yudhishtira waited in silence for him to resume. The Mahamuni, Brahma's son, did so, with a twinkle in his eye.

'Have you heard the old story of Prahlada and the Avadhuta Dattatreya? No? Well, once king Prahlada, Hari's beloved bhakta, ranged his kingdom with some of his main advisors. He came to the green valleys in the Western Ghats, and saw the strangest hermit he ever had, lying on the banks of the Kaveri, his thick body covered entirely in mud and dust, its natural aura hidden.

No one with the king knew who the unusual one was: not from his appearance, his actions, or anything he said. He bore no sign of any varna or asrama either. Prahlada prostrated before the Avadhuta, laid his head at the earth-covered one's feet, and spoke to him.

"Master," said Prahlada, "you have the corpulent body of one having wealth and given to pleasure. Yet I see you are not such a one. Living here, as we find you, you cannot have any wealth. So how can you have the life that makes a man fat? Yet fat you are, master, and I would know how you have become so, just lying here. I beg your pardon if I offend you by asking this, but we are all eager to unravel this mystery.

From your speech, we see that you are erudite, capable, more intelligent than any of us, and astonishingly eloquent. You watch the world hard at work, yet you lie here, doing nothing or next to that, despite your many obvious gifts."

The Avadhuta smiled, so radiantly! He seemed pleased and replied in the softest, sweetest voice.

"Asuraraja! You know the answers to every question that you have asked me, for you are a man of the spirit, and blessed. You are he that all men know and revere, Vishnu's precious bhakta.

You know the different fruit to be had from the paths of desire and that of renunciation. I see Narayana shining in your heart like a sun, scattering every vestige of the ignorant dark. Yet, since you ask, great one, whom all those honour that seek moksha, I will answer your questions, from what my Guru once taught me.

Once, I was a victim of desire. I experienced many fine satisfactions, the most climactic pleasures; yet desire did not leave me, it was never slaked. I was born again and again, in body after body, birth after birth, death after death. I was born into every conceivable species by my karma. Finally, I have a human body, which the wise say is the most evolved one. I know that yet again I can use this birth either to strive for the realms of heaven and their extraordinary pleasures, moksha, or follow a brutish life that will lead me to another life as a beast or a man.

Time after time, I have seen how grihastas, the householders, of this world work themselves to the bone. For what? Basically, always to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. Despite their every effort, what they get is invariably the opposite of what they want. So I have stopped working, withdrawn from the active world.

Joy is to be had only from the Atman, whose very nature is blissful. I know that to have that Atman emerge into one's life and consciousness, one must be passive, inward and abstain from all karma. Other pleasures and enjoyments are only projections of the mind, with no basis in permanence or reality. So here I am in quietude, certainly tasting the fruit of my old karma, my prarabdha, but avoiding, as much as I can, any new karma.

Man always has the eternal ecstasy of his soul in his heart, but he spends his life chasing after unreal, slight pleasures, and binds himself into birth after birth. All the while, what he seeks is within him, nearer to him than himself. It is like a man chasing a mirage of water in the distance, while abandoning the lake full of sweet real water that is right by his side, but overgrown with lotus-pads.

Men that have no faith in God or in their own spiritual destiny waste their lives chasing after mirages of pleasure, that distance themselves repeatedly whenever one draws near them. They live shackled to their karma, strengthening the bonds of ignorance by everything they do, and never making any attempt to free themselves and discover the undying joy that is their natural inheritance, that is simple and infinite. Their ceaseless striving to gain pleasure and avoid pain succeed or fail despite their efforts, and only because of their past karma, good and bad.

Man makes an enormous effort, yet he does not benefit from the fruit of his labour. He suffers from the three kinds of torment that his body and mind inflict upon him: the adhyatmika, from within; those that external forces fetch, adhibhautika; and those caused by supernatural forces, adhidaivika.

The richest men are the most miserly, enslaved by their senses and always in pain. They cannot sleep because they are full of fear; and awake, they are full of suspicion of their fellow men: it becomes second nature to them.

Men that cling to their lives and their riches are ruled by terror of many sorts: from the king, from robbers, from enemies, from their own kinsmen, from wild animals, from those that come to beg from them and finally from their own minds, when these are jaded and tired by indulgences, and when wealth is denuded by expenses that always mount.

A wise man renounces his attachment to the pleasures of the senses; he abandons his lust for amassing wealth. He realises that both these are the roots of grief, blind fascinations, terror, rage, attachment, helplessness and depletion of the spirit's resources."

The Avadhuta paused, then laughed, crystal laughter! "Magnificent and wise Asura, I have two masters in this world, the honeybee and the python. From them, I learnt the lessons of relinquishment and contentment. The bee taught me renunciation. For he toils so hard to collect his sweet honey; and then the honey-gatherers come, smoke him out, even killing him if they want, and take what he has gathered so painstakingly. So, too, do thieves take the rich man's wealth from him, murdering him if he stands in their way.

From the python I learnt how to wait, the lesson of patience. He does not hunt actively, but waits for his prey to come to him; then feeds and is satisfied with whatever he has eaten. He lies still, in wait, and so do I. When chance or fate brings me something to eat, I feed on it, then am content to be quiet again, waiting for my next meal, but conserving myself in the meanwhile. Prahlada, I have always found sustenance in this fashion. Never have I starved, and look at me, my strength and my size are undiminished.

At times, I receive a large meal, at others a little one. Often the food I get is overcooked, then again, underdone. Sometimes it is spicy, otherwise bland. It may be offered to me with reverence, or without it. On occasion, I eat at night, on others during the day; or perhaps, both by day and night.

I am here to exhaust my prarabdha, and I wear whatever is given me: silk or hide, sackcloth or valkala. If someone is kind to me, I sleep on a soft bed, even on the upper floor of a fine house. Otherwise, I am equally happy on an ash-heap, a bed of stones, leaves, grass, or on bare ground.

Great Demon, at times I wander the world in a chariot, followed by elephants and horses. I wear the finest silks and ornaments; at others, I go as naked as a ghost and alone, unknown. I do not praise those whom the world considers great, or deride those it demeans. Yet, I do pray that all of them, who are so myriad in their nature and their circumstances, find bhakti for God, and realise their unity with Him."

The wild one stopped, seemed to think a moment, then in chaste language, using a great scholar's flawless syntax and diction, continued.

"The perception of reality as being diverse must be absorbed in the attitudes of mind that perceive it as being so. These must be dissolved in manas, the inner mind, which makes the attitudes that distort truth and perception. Manas must be abandoned to the sattvika ahamkara, the sense of the I. The sense of self must be resolved into the larger sense of Self, the mahatattva, and the mahatattva relinquished in maya, the Lord's power of delusion.

The seeker renounces maya in the Atman, the Soul, which is the Brahman, the purest and final consciousness. So, Prahlada, the way I am and you find me is a result of that dissolution: this is a secret way of life, and I have shared it with you only because I see the Lord Hari in you and know you are his bhakta."

With this, and a beatific smile briefly lighting his dust-layered face, the Paramahamsa, for he was no less, fell silent. It was as if he had said nothing, lazily, and everything there ever was to say and everything that had ever been said. Such intense joy filled Prahlada's heart to hear Dattatreya, and he prostrated himself again to worship the Avadhuta. Taking the dust from the holy one's feet, the Vishnubhakta Asura left him and returned to his city, Yudhishtira,' said Narada Muni to the Pandava Emperor."

THE WAY OF THE GRIHASTA

SUKA CONTINUED BLITHELY, "YUDHISHTIRA ASKED, 'DIVINE MUNI, HOW can someone like me, who is deeply involved in family life, find grace?'

Narada replied, 'A grihasta must offer whatever he does, his life, all his karma, to Narayana. He must seek out and serve holy men, the Rishis of the earth, the enlightened ones, listening to the Lord's legends, especially of his incarnations.

Gradually, the householder renounces his possessions, or rather, his attachment to them, his attachment for his wife and children, his very body, and begins to view them all as one does objects and people in a dream: for he realises that all these vanish in time, just as dreams do. All his thoughts flow towards Vishnu.

Yet he lives a dedicated life, making every effort to support his family to the best of his ability, though his heart remains detached from his striving. From outward appearances, the most detached and learned grihasta seems a man attached to the mundane world and all that it has to offer. He gives proper credence to the counsel and ideas of his parents, wife, sons, brothers, relatives and friends, seldom dissenting, inwardly always detached and calm.

He thinks of anything he gets as a gift from Vishnu, be it the grain from cultivating a field, helped by rain from the sky, or gold from a buried treasure he happens upon. He enjoys whatever he has with this attitude, and discharges his varna dharma conscientiously. Every embodied jiva is permitted to have such food as he needs to feed himself. When he has or keeps more than his needs, he is a thief and merits punishment.

The evolved grihasta thinks of the beasts of the world, deer, camels, donkeys, rats, snakes, even insects, as his own children, and harms none of the living. All these come from God, so what difference is there between one's own children and them?

The good grihasta surely strives to achieve dharma, artha and kama, but always reasonably and moderately, never excessively. He honours his circumstances, whatever they are, and is content with what his past karma brings him. Further, he shares what he has with dogs, beggars and outcastes, the lowest of the low.

The wise grihasta hardly feels possessive of even his wife: someone whom most men guard jealously and anxiously. He is well aware that a man can kill his father or Guru for a woman's sake, and guards himself against such blind passion and attachment. Why, the man who overcomes his possessiveness for his woman is said to have conquered God Himself!

How worthless, say the truly wise, is this body, which soon becomes dust and ashes. How ludicrous is the thought of having a woman and allowing her to drive one mad with jealousy, only for the sake of briefly pleasuring the worthless, transient, treacherous body.

How majestic, how awesome, how eternal is the grandeur of the Atman beside these whimpering pleasures: the Soul whose lustre can light up the endless sky!

The devoted grihasta performs his daily rituals, makes his daily offerings; then he himself eats the remains of what he offers the Gods. He renounces his sense of possessions and possessiveness. Thus, even while he leads a householder's active life, his spirit treads the path towards becoming a Sannyasi. The good grihasta performs the panchamahayagna daily: the five great sacrifices, offerings to the five objects of worship: the Devas, Rishis, Pitrs, men and beasts.

If he has what he needs for it, the knowledge, the competence and the articles of offering, he can perform agnihotra, by the laws prescribed for it. Yet the Lord is always happier with food offered to him through the mouths of holy men than he is with the burnt offerings of havis. Thus the grihasta worships God through the Devas and Rishis, down to the lowest men and creatures, each according to their need and status, and also his own.

If a householder has the means, he must offer sraddha to his dead parents and their sires, during the dark fortnight of the waning moon, called mahaalaya, in the month called Bhadra. He performs this sraddha also at the summer and winter solstices, and the equinoxes of spring and autumn. He does so at vyatipata, the day when a lunar day begins and ends without the sun being in the sky or between two sunrises.

He performs sraddha during lunar and solar eclipses, on the twelfth lunar day, as well as during the times when the constellations Sravana, Dhanishta and Satabhisha are rising; on the third lunar day of the bright half of Visakha and on the ninth day of the bright fortnight of Krittika; or the four ashtakas during the seasons of hemanta and sishira: autumn and winter.

He makes his offerings on the full moon of Magha, when that asterism is rising on the horizon; when the constellations of the other months of the Moon appear on the day of a full moon; when the moon rises a digit less than fullness on such days; on any twelfth lunar day when the nakshatras Anuradha, Sravana or Uttara, Uttarada or Uttarabhadrapada are rising; on the eleventh day when the Moon is in conjunction with any of these asterisms; finally, on any day when the nakshatra under which he was born is rising or the sign of Sravana.

All the above are auspicious days, and fortunate; they are well suited not only for the performance of sraddhas, but any undertaking. Ritual baths, chanting mantras, offering of havis, the worship of Devas and Rishis, giving charity in the name of one's sires: all these become many times as fruitful when done on these days.

Yudhishtira, they are especially auspicious for the wife's pumsavana rites of purification, birth and life passage rituals for a son, funeral rites, rituals on a death anniversary, and those performed to sanctify oneself.'

Yudhishtira asked, 'Tell me about the holy places of the earth, Muni, the tirthas that are most suited for the performance of holy rituals.'

Narada answered, 'Yes. The places where such rites are undertaken swell their effects. Best of all is where a Rishi has sat in dhyana and been blessed by the Lord. Wherever an image of God is installed and worshipped, or where Sages sit in tapasya: these are also sacred. Where holy rivers flow, like the Ganga, of which the Puranas tell, on the banks of lakes like the Pushkara, and other tirthas like Kurukshetra, Gaya, Prayaga, Pulahasrama, wherever magnificent bhaktas have dwelt, are all auspicious.

Naimisa vana, Phalguna, Sri Ramasetu, Prabhasa, Kusasthali, Varanasi, Mathura, Pampa, the Bindusaras, Badarikasrama, the banks of the Alakananda, Chitrakuta, Panchavati where Rama and Sita lived, Mount Mahendra and Malaya, all these are among the holiest tirthas. Seekers must go often to such places, for rituals performed there are a thousand times as efficacious as elsewhere.

For long ages men have pondered who is most worthy of receiving worship, and they have all come to the same conclusion: it is the Supreme Lord, in whom all the worlds are born, abide and perish, of whom they are all material manifestations. Pandava, during your rajasuya yagna, the imperial sacrifice, the Devas, Rishis, Siddhas and Paramahamsas like Sanaka were present. Yet, you offered Krishna the purodasa, the first worship.

The Brahmanda, the cosmic shell, is like a tree, of which all the galaxies are the branches, outspread. The Lord Achyuta, Mahavishnu, is the root of the cosmic tree. When you worship him, you revere every creature in the universe; you satisfy their souls. For, after he created the worlds and their every being, he continues to dwell in them all, as the jiva. He lives in this city of the nine gates: the body. He is called the Purusha. In some bodies, he manifests himself more fully, in others less so. He surely manifests himself more completely in man than in beasts, and among men, he is most present in the spiritually evolved man: the Yogi, the Sannyasi, and the Muni.

Yudhishtira, men became first irreverent of one another, and inimical, when they began to be conscious of each other's defects and did not see the living God anymore within their fellow men. So, in the treta yuga, the greatest Rishis created stone images of the Lord and invented the method of worshipping him as his idols. In these images no man could find evil!

Some men worship Vishnu through his holy images, created by the Sages of yore, infused by the Lord. Yet, the Sages do say that it is no point if a man worship the most sacred image if he despises or oppresses his fellow man.

Among all men, the holy one, the Rishi, is considered the Lord's finest, fullest receptacle. For, by his austerity, his knowledge and his peace, he is the custodian of the Veda, which is Hari's body. Why, Krishna himself, who is the Soul of the universe, says that such men purify the earth by the touch of their feet. He worships them himself! So, you might imagine their greatness,' said Narada," said Suka Deva to Parikshit.

MOKSHA, THE FINAL IDEAL

"NARADA SAID, 'SOME OF THE TWICE-BORN DEVOTE THEMSELVES TO rituals, others to charity, some to chanting the Vedas, some to sacred discourse, and some few to the paths of gyana and yoga.

Men that want the finest results to accrue from their worship offer the ritually prepared food made for the manes and the gods to such a holy one. If a Mahatma cannot be found, the offerings are made to lesser men, yet learned and holy themselves.

Two Rishis may be fed in the rituals performed for the Devas; three, in offerings made to the Pitrs. Or just one great Rishi may be fed during both rites. Especially during a sraddha for the ancestors, too much feeding of others must be avoided, even if the worshipper is wealthy. These are sacred rituals, and not meant for showing off one's wealth or social status.

The sacredness of the rite is vitiated by a great feast without inner content. For, while having to entertain large numbers of guests, the sacrificer will not be able to give adequate care to the place, the time, the due worth of the guest, the exactitude the rite demands, the correctness of the materials he needs, the cleanliness of the vessels, the ingredients; and all these are far more vital to the success of a sraddha or other rite, rather than the ostentaion or the number of people fed.

If just roots and fruit, offered to Vishnu at a proper time and place, are fed to one deserving guest, the ritual may be considered a success and the worshipper shall have the results he wants and in a lasting manner.

If food is offered separately to the Devas, the Rishis, the Pitrs, to kinsmen and animals, they must all be invoked as amsas of God. No man that knows the true nature of sacred law ever consumes or offers flesh at a sraddha. The manes are always more pleased by an offering of roots and fruit, which are not stained with the blood of slaughter. Men who seek spiritual evolution never injure any living being, directly or otherwise.

So, the Sages, who are without desire, purify ritual sacrifice into the yagna of knowledge, full of restraint and wisdom. When any man plans a blood sacrifice, every creature flees in terror, saying, "This one is evil and full of lust. His heart is without mercy and he is sure to kill me!"

The just man is happy with the food of saints: cereals, fruit and roots obtained with no great effort, which sustain his body, but neither slake nor fuel his greed or lust. Thus subsisting, he performs his dharma, and the occasional sacrifice.

There are five kinds of adharma, which might appear to be dharma, which the true seeker renounces: vidharma, paradharma, abhasa, upama and cchala.

Vidharma might appear to be 'good work', yet affects one's own dharma adversely. Paradharma is the dharma of another, which one must never undertake. Upadharma is the dharma of infidels, who have no true belief in their hearts, but only make a show of being pious. Cchala is when a man interprets the holy scriptures to suit himself, and abhasa is the worst: it is work done with no regard for what is prescribed for a man's asrama or varna; it is the perversion of dharma. Only dharma that is true to his birth and inner nature brings peace to a man.

A man without desire does not struggle either to do his dharma or for wealth, if he is poor. For his very relinquishment and passivity will fetch him food, as they do for the python. How can the distraught man, the distracted man, always on the move, always toiling for possessions, ever find the ecstasy of the man who is absorbed in his Atman? The first man is peaceless, all his efforts in vain; the second is perfectly contented, blissful always.

Feet that wear shoes walk in comfort over stones and thorns; so, too, the man encased in the peace of the Atman, finds joy wherever he is. If a man has made the connection to the soul, he will be satisfied with just some fluids to feed his body.

However, those who have not made the timeless connection run here and there, rather like dogs on heat, to satisfy their lust and greed. For those who have not found inner peace, all the nobler qualities, their dignity, learning, austerity and reputation flow away from them by their ceaseless sensual indulgence. Whatever gyana they have, is destroyed.

There are so many great scholars, renowned for their erudition and their ability to remove the doubts of others, men who preside over great assemblies of the learned, who yet become degenerate because they have no true inward peace, no real contentment.

The true ascetic renounces his sexuality by abandoning sankalpa, the will towards pleasure. He overcomes anger by renouncing lust, greed by thinking about the spiritual risks of becoming rich, and his fear by meditating on God, the final Truth.

Grief and fascination can only be transcended by reflecting upon the distinction between the Atman and the anatman, the soul and what is not the soul, reality and delusion. The seeker crushes his vanity and pride by associating with great men, realising how small his own wisdom is before theirs. He overcomes hurdles on the path of dhyana by practicing mowna, keeping silence; he quells tendencies towards violence by conquering his attachment to his body and his possessions.

He pacifies the hurt received from other men and creatures by being kind to them; the effects of prarabdha karma from past lives by being tranquil; harm from his own body with pranayama; and darkness experienced in sleep by eating sattvik food.

He vanquishes tamas and rajas by sattva, and excessive sattva by discrimination and unswerving devotion to the truth. All this he can achieve most easily with bhakti for his Guru, by thinking of his master as God on earth. If a sishya thinks of his Guru as any less than God, everything that he has learnt from his master is as worthless as a bath given to an elephant, which sprays mud over its body as soon as it emerges from the river.

Some might say that all his friends treat my Guru as just another man, then how can I treat him as if he is God? Look, the answer is before you. Here is Krishna, Lord of the universe, of souls and Prakriti; and see how many of our own friends and relatives see him as just a man. How many truly know that he is God incarnate? He himself seems perfectly content to be treated as a man, for so he has been born. Then why should one's Guru being human affect his sishya seeing him as God, too?

The Vedas all teach the restraint of the senses, indeed even as the final aim of all charity and rituals. Yet, if these disciplines somehow obstruct dhyana, the control of the mind, they are mere empty hardship, and quite meaningless. It is the mind that must be restrained.

The practice of farming and trade hardly help one advance towards spiritual communion, but even become impediments on the way. So also charity and ritual, without inner truth, performed by an asat, an extrovert who does not understand inner meaning, can drag a man back rather than help him advance on the way to nirvana.

If a man is sincere about evolving spiritually, and restraining his mind, and he find obstacles to this progress in his life as a householder, he should cultivate detachment passivity and renounce his possessiveness. Why, he should leave his home and seek solitary parts, to live the hermit's life. He should learn to subsist on whatever he receives as alms, the sparest meals.

In the quiet place, he sits on clean, flat ground, with his back, neck and head erect, and chants Pranava, the holiest mantra, AUM. He sits thus chanting, his eyes half-shut, his gaze fixed on the tip of his nose, and controls pana and apana, with pranayama, by pooraka, kumbhaka and rechaka.

When the mind revolts and flies like the wind or wild horses, after some fantasy of desire, he must gently but firmly fetch it back to the cave of the heart. As often as he loses control, he must exert it again. When a man does this regularly, he will find that his minds soon subsides into quiescence itself, even like fire which has consumed all its fuel.

The mind that has been conquered, which is not disturbed anymore by thoughts of greed or sex, and is rapt in the bliss of the Brahman: such a mind will never turn outwards again, to vainly seek satisfaction in objects of the senses.

If a man once renounces grihastasrama, the aims of which are only dharma, artha and kama, to become a Sannyasi, and returns to grihastasrama again, he is like one who eats his own vomit, entirely shameless. There are Sages who declaim that this body is worthless and becomes excrement, food for worms and ashes; yet, they gather disciples round them who worship their master's body.

A grihasta who does not observe his dharma, a brahmacharin who violates his celibacy, a vanaprastha who comes to live in towns and villages, a Sannyasi who indulges in sensuality: these are hypocrites, the worst of their kind. They are victims of delusion and are to be shunned. No man who has truly realised the unity of the soul within him with Satchitananda is ever tempted to resume the life of the senses again, or fatten his flesh.

The Rishis compare this body to a chariot. The senses are the horses, the mind the reins, the intellect the sarathy, and chitta, primal consciousness, the axle. They say the ten pranas, the vital breaths, are the shaft of the axle, dharma and adharma are the two wheels of the ratha. The jiva, bound by the illusion of selfhood, is the master of the chariot.

Pranava, the sacred AUM, is his bow, the jiva burnt pure in wisdom, is his arrow, and his target is the Brahman! The manifestations of evil are the enemies he must face: attachment, anger, avarice, sorrow, fascination, fear, pride, vanity, envy, thievery, violence, rivalry, passion, carelessness, hunger and sleep, all these are the seeker's foes, the creatures of rajas and tamas.

There are times when even pure sattva, which usually helps the seeker along his way, becomes an impediment for the evolved Sage, as it did with the excessive kindness of Bharata Muni towards the deer. Finally, all the gunas must be overcome.

When the chariot that is the body has been brought under control by subduing the senses, then the aspirant takes up the sword of gyana, sharpened by the service of the wise and the great. With it, he kills the enemies born of rajas and tamas. The strength he uses comes from Vishnu! Once he attains the primal condition, union with the Atman, he abandons the body's chariot.

However, when a man does not follow the path of restraint and wisdom, the wild horses, the senses, will fetch the jiva into the presence of the brigands: the objects of the senses, of gratification. These will drag the jiva down into the dark vortex of samsara, the disused well, with the horses and the sarathy. Here there is only the darkness of ignorance and the ceaseless terror of dying.

The Vedas deal with two kinds of karma: that which leads to pravritti and the other to nivritti. The way of pravritti, deeds, leads to repeated births, while by nivritti, one transcends rebirth and becomes immortal.

Any yagna that slaughters an animal or uses an extravagance of materials, like agnihotra, darsha, purnamasa, chaturmasa, pasuyaga, somayaga, vaisvedeva, any offerings of Bali: these are all known as Ishta yagnas.

Acts of charity, like building a temple, a public park, a well, a tank, arranging for water to be given to the people: these are called Poorta. Yet, if these are done with any attachment to their fruit, for wealth, fame or glory, they only bring mental unease, and are considered pravritti; and they lead to rebirth. If they are performed with no desire, as offerings to God, they are nivritti, and lead to moksha.

For those who indulge in pravritti, they tread Pitriyana, the path of the manes, after they die. The effects are of the havis they offer creating a subtle spirit body, which rises through the gods of smoke, night, the dark fortnight of the moon, the southern solstice, dakshinayana. The subtle body rises after it leaves the material one to the realm of the moon. There it dwells in both joy and grief until it dissolves and falls as rain into the green earth, into food and seed, semen, and is then reborn in the world, after these stages.

Only a dvija, a twice-born soul who has had the rites of purification performed for him, treads the path of the manes.

But the man who is devoted to moksha, nivritti, offers all his karma in his senses ablaze with gyana, Ishta and Poorta, as dhyana, as tapasya. He offers the senses in the fire of the mind; the mind and its modes in speech; speech he gives up in the Single sacred syllable, which contains all speech within Itself, the Omkara; AUM he subsumes into the Bindu, the sacred point, the singularity; Nindu in Naada; naada in the Atman within; the Atman within with the Paramatman.

The seeker after nivritti passes through the Gods of fire, the sun, the day, noon, the bright fortnight of the month and its end, the full moon, uttarayana, the northern path of the sun, and finds Brahmaloka. He finds union with Viswa, Taijasa and Prajna and dissolves the three bodies associated with these: the gross, the subtle and the causal. He is absorbed into the fourth state, the Turiya, which transcends the others, the final beatitude.

The Rishis call this path Devayana, the way of the Gods. Unlike the man entangled in karma, he who contemplates the Atman in calm becomes rooted in that ultimate consciousness and is not reborn again and again. The seeker who understands these two paths as they are explained in the Veda is not fascinated by anything external, even while he has a body.

There is the one that was before the body, and he remains as he was when the body dies. He manifests himself as the knower and the known, high and low, pleasure and the one who experiences it, the word and its meaning, darkness and light. When everything that exists is part of one's own self, then what remains to be desired or feared?

When we see an object reflected in a mirror, it appears to be real; but logically, it does not exist. Similarly, the external and perceived worlds are only reflections and projections; they are maya. Only so long as the jiva thinks of himself as being apart from the Brahman does he see the world as being objective reality. In the Lord's being, the earth, the galaxies do not exist, nor do the elements of which they are made: not as their parts, not as a process, nor even a continuum.

The objects of the senses and the mind are neither apart from Him, nor part of Him, in any way that affects, increases or lessens his Being, his existence. They are mithya; they have no fundamental reality on their own.

Even the Panchamahabhutas, the primeval elements, do not exist apart from their subtle essences, the Tanmatras. If they are unreal, imaginary, so, too, must be the stuff of which they are formed. In the realm of the Atman, there is perfect unity, no duality. Yet as long as ignorance persists, so will the delusion of the world of samsara as being real.

The problem arises, then, whether the scriptures and all that they enjoin are not meaningless, since they, too, must be unreal. And truly, even the scriptures have meaning only as long as the jiva is bound in ignorance. Inside dreams, we experience sleep and waking; when the dream is over and the sleeper awakes, neither have any meaning. So it is with this world experienced as being apart from one's self, and even the Vedas.

The spiritual seeker who adopts the regular practice of bhavaadvaita, kriyaadvaita and dravyaadvaita for the Atman will pass beyond the three conditions: of waking, sleep and dreams.

Duality is insubstantial and imaginary. It has no reality apart from its cause, even as cotton fabric has none apart from cotton. Bhavaadvaita is to contemplate all being as part of God. Kriyaadvaita is to offer all one's deeds, speech and thoughts to God. The realisation that the next man and we ourselves are the same, in essence, in our needs and desires, indeed, in who we are, is dravyaadvaita.

Yudhishtira, except in times of danger or war, the grihasta performs his dharma and lives his secular life, as well, with money earned by righteous means, sanctioned in the scriptures, earned at the apposite time and place. The Munis have said that a grihasta who lives by dharma can attain to the very Brahman even while living a householder's life, as long as he has deep bhakti for God.

Pandava, may his grace be upon you always, who saved you from seemingly impossible peril, who helped you subdue the world and to perform the Aswamedha yagna unhindered. Surrender yourself to Krishna, O son of Pandu, and you shall find moksha at his feet.'

The awesome wanderer, greatest of all Vishnubhaktas, paused, momentarily ruminative. Slowly, he continued, 'In the last Kalpa, I was a Gandharva. My name was Upabarhana and all my people honoured me. I was handsome, my body always smelt sweet, my speech was mellifluous and I was given to wine, endless pleasure and, most of all, to the company of women.

Once, at a yagna of the Devas, the Prajapatis called all the Gandharvas and Apsaras to sing about Hari's lila, and to dance to our music. I knew very well the songs I was expected to sing, yet I went with three women on my arms and singing the frankest love songs! With their tapasya shakti, the Prajapatis cursed me for my impudence.

"You have mocked us all, Upabarhana. Lose all your charms now, which have made you so vain. Be lowborn, weak and ugly!"

I was born a maidservant's son. In that birth, I had occasion to associate with and to serve some of the wisest Rishis of those times, of that age: men of the Brahman. By their blessings, in this Kalpa I was born as Brahma's son, born not of a woman, but from his thought.

You now know the path of the grihasta, the dharma, punya and bhakti that save him from bondage in samsara. You know the way by which the householder finds the same nirvana that the Sannyasin does. Why, Yudhishtira, just look around you: you are the most fortunate of men! The holiest Sages in all Bharatavarsha, the touch of whose feet sanctifies the earth, teem in your home, knowing that blue Krishna lives with you, his Godhood disguised by a human form.

He is your friend, your mentor, your cousin and your Guru; he reveres and serves you! But Yudhishtira, he is the Parabrahman, whom all the Rishis want to meet; he is the Avatara, whose touch is transcendent ecstasy. May he bless us, whose depths Brahma and Rudra cannot plumb, who is worshipped with bhakti, mowna and shanti: devotion, silence and calm.'"

Vyasa's noble son Suka said, "The Pandava emperor, king of all the Bharatas, was enraptured by what Narada said. Swept by a wave of bhakti, he worshipped both Krishna and the Muni.

When this was done, Narada took his leave of the Pandava and his cousin, the Avatara. Yudhishtira's joy knew no bounds to hear Narada confirm what he had himself always believed.

These, O Parikshit, are the generations of the daughters of Daksha Prajapati, among whom the Devas, the Asuras and humans are all numbered."

And the king listened in awe and silence, peace dawning over his spirit.

Skandha 8

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THE FIRST FOUR MANVANTARAS

RAJA PARIKSHIT NOW SAID, "YOU HAVE NOW TOLD US ABOUT THE LINE of Svayambhuva Manu. You have described how, during his Manvantara, the Prajapatis begot sons upon the daughters of the Manus. But now tell me about the other Manus and their Manvantaras. Tell me about all the Avataras of Vishnu, of which the Rishis sing. Tell us what Hari did in Manvantaras of the past, what he is doing in this one and what He will do in the Manvantaras of the future."

Sri Suka, the blessed one, said, "Beginning with Svayambhuva Manu's, six Manvantaras of this Kalpa have passed. In that first Manu's time, the Devas and Asuras were first created, as were all the other races and species. To establish dharma and strengthen it, Vishnu incarnated himself through Manu's daughters Akuti and Devahuti, as Yagna Deva and Kapila Muni.

I have already told you about the immortal Kapila. Listen now to the life of Yagna.

Satarupa's husband, Svayambhuva, became disenchanted with every pleasure of this world and retired into Sannyasa in the forest with his wife. They lived on the banks of the Sunanda, with him performing intense tapasya.

Svayambhuva Manu stood on one leg for a hundred years and chanted:

Yen chetayate viswam, viswam chetayate na yam;
Yoh jagriti shayanesminnayam tam veda veda sah.
Atmavasyamidam visram yat kimchajjagatyaam jagat;
Tena Taktena Bhunjithaa maa gridhah kasyasvidhanam…

He is the Consciousness because of whom there is consciousness in the world. But the world does not make him conscious because he is self-illumined, the Un-born and primal Consciousness: the universe is what he makes.

He is awake when the world sleeps. The world knows him not, but he knows the world. For he pervades the universe and everything in it, all beings too; they all belong just to him. Make your offerings to him, then consume whatever is left.

Never covet what belongs to someone else; for God is the only owner. And of all the wealth in the three realms, as well. He is the only true consciousness, the final and single subject: He sees all things, but none see him: He who is always awake and conscious, before and after individual consciousnesses die.

He is beyond change, the universal support. He is the One the Veda describes as the Bird of exquisite plumage. In Him, we seek sanctuary.

He has no beginning, middle or end. For him, no thing is apart from him; nothing is within him, or without. Yet, he is the font of all the living, from whom the universe flows, who manifests as the universe. He is the Paramatman, the Truth, and contains all being inside him.

The universe is his body, a mere atom of him. He has countless names; all that is true belongs only to him; he is Chitta, who was never born and never dies, yet always existed and always shall. With awesome maya, he creates, nurtures and destroys galaxies, universes without number. However, he always remains immaculate and transcends his maya.

The Sages of the world, its wisest men, worship God so they might also find the ultimate ecstasy, the final refuge and bliss: at first, they worship Him with nishkaama karma, by working ceaselessly. They offer all this karma to Iswara, and by working slowly come to the condition beyond karma, to eternal rest.

Why, God himself is always at work. But karma does not bind him, for he is absorbed forever in his inner peace, the infinite ocean of grace. He works perfectly, without any desire, never wanting anything from his work. Those that follow this way shall also never be bound by their karma, but find moksha through it.

The Lord Hari is my sanctuary. His Avataras each have their own nature and mission, and they fulfil these in accordance with the age and time into *which they take birth. The Lord is omniscient, perfectly content, as are his incarnations. He is his own master, under no one's command or power, for beyond him there is no power. He is the Guru, the one who lights the way through the darkness of ignorance for every living being. He is the font of dharma.'*

As Svayambhuva Manu stood on one leg, perfectly absorbed, chanting these holy mantras, some voracious Asuras and rakshasas saw the Manu, and stalked him. Finally they rushed at him to devour Svayambhuva Manu, when Vishnu appeared as Yagna, with his sons round him, the divine beings called the Yamas, and burnt up the demons in a flash.

We must understand that every Manvantara is ruled its own Manu and has its distinct Devas, Saptarishis, Manuputras, Indra and Avataras. Svayambhuva is the first Manu of this present Kalpa, and the Yamas were Devas of his Manvantara. The Manuputras were Priyavrata and Utaanapaada, and both its Indra and its Avatara was Yagna Deva.

For every day of Brahma's cosmic life, four thousand three hundred and twenty million human years, there are fourteen Manus, each living and ruling for approximately three hundred and eight million years of men.

Agni Deva's son Svaarochisha was the second Manu. His sons were Dyuman, Sushena, Rochishman, and some others, too The Indra of his Manvantara was Rochana; the Devas were Tushita, and the rest, Urjasthamba and six others, were the Saptarishis. Rishi Vedasiras and his wife Tushitaa begot the Lord's Avatara, and he was called Vibhu.

Vibhu was celibate all his life and he had eighty-eight thousand young men for disciples who were all brahmacharis, too: that was their sworn path.

Priyavrata's son Uttama was the third Manu. He had seven sons, among them Pavana, Srinjaya and Yagnahotra. Vasishta's sons, Pramada and his six brothers, were the Saptarishis; the Satyas, Vedasrutas and Bhadras were the Devas and Satyajit the Indra. Vishnu's Avatara during this Manvantara was Satyasena, Dharma Deva's son by his wife Sunrita. He came with the Devas called the Satyavratas, and killed and exorcised numberless rakshasas, yakshas and pisachas and bhutas for the sake of his friend Satyajit, the Devendra of that time.

The fourth Manu was Tamasa, Uttama's brother. His ten sons included Prithu, Khyati, Nara and Ketu. The Devas of this Manvantara were the Satyakas, the Haris and Viras, and Trisikha was their king, their Indra. Jyotirdhama and six others were the Saptarishi. Also among the gods of that time, were the legendary sons of Vidhriti called the Vaidhritas. The Vedas had almost been forgotten in the world and they were recovered by the fathomless memory of these Vaidhritas. Vishnu incarnated himself in this Manvantara as Harimedhas and Harini's son, and he was called Hari.

Hari saved the great elephant from the crocodile's jaws."

Parikshit was agog. "Vyasaputra, tell me how Hari rescued the elephant from the crocodile."

And Suka, the son of Vyasa Muni, who is also called Badarayana, began to relate the legend of Hari in King Parikshit's gathering of seers.

THE LORD OF ELEPHANTS IN DANGER

SUKA BEGAN, "KSHATRIYA, THERE WAS ONCE A GREAT MOUNTAIN called Trikuta, ten thousand yojanas tall, replete with treasures of every sort and surrounded by an ocean of milk. It was ten thousand yojanas across at its base, as well, and it had three peaks: one golden, one silver, and another of shining iron. These glittered with all kinds of precious jewels and fabulous metals, illumining the sea and the sky and quarters with varicoloured light.

Trikuta stood like some immense ornament, with its profusion of trees, plants and flowers, its towering and countless waterfalls cascading down its sides, all around. White waves lapped at its beaches, which sparkled green, as did the entire base of the mountain: with magnificent emeralds.

Innumerable caves were carved into the triune massifs, and in them the most wonderful beings came to frolic, to sing and dance and, of course, to make love: Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Apsaras, nagas, kinnaras and kimpurushas. In some caves, solemn Charanas and Siddhas sat in dhyana. At times, a lion would roar back at the echoing songs of kinnaras making merry inside a cave, mistaking their music for another lion encroaching on his territory, or a lioness in season calling!

Trikuta was rich with enchanted jade valleys, too, teeming with birds and animals of every species, every hue. Birdsong filled the spaces of the mountain, and rivers flowed down it, and clear streams and brooks, some banked by white and pearly sand. Lakes and magical pools dotted various parts of the three peaks, and their water, as the very air of the mountain was redolent with the scents of the bodies of the Apsaras that bathed here.

A favourite haunt of these nymphs was a wild garden that nestled in a most secret valley, which belonged to the Varuna called Rituman. The most remarkable trees grew here, with flowers in unworldly colours and fruit of matchless taste. Upon the mountains that hemmed that garden were dense stands of every conceivable tree. There were mandara, parijata, paatala, asoka, champaka, mango, priyaala, jackfruit, amra, plum, arecanut, madhuka, saala, palmyra, taamala, rasana, arjuna, arishta, udumbara, plaksha, vata, kimsuka, chandana, ichumanda, kovidara, sarala, devadaru, draksha, ganna, rambha, jambu, badari, aksha, abhaya, amala, bilwa, kapittha, jambeera, bhallaataka, and others, all lush, wonderfully alive, and blessings upon the earth on which they stood rooted.

At the heart of all these, was a lake like shimmering crystal, on whose water golden lotuses floated. Also alive on those lucid, breeze-caressed waters grew kumuda blooms, utpala, thick banks of saugandhikas, whose fragrance is a legend through time, and satapatra, that are the very flowers of the soul, thousand-petalled.

The air was filled by the drone of bees drunk on the scents of the blooms and their nectar, and, of course, the sweetest songs of clear throated birds, songs like worship. Swans glided upon the lake, royal hamsas, as did karandakas, chakravakas and sarasas, and the warbling of jalakukkutas, koyashtis and datyoohas softly rang through the leaves of the trees and across the lake.

The golden and other lotuses trembled in the breeze, or when a fish or tortoise swam near them, and cast their pollen onto the sapphire waters, so they were perfumed with that fine dust, too. Kadamba, vetasa, nala, neepa and vanjulaka stood immediately around the lake, between its banks and the denser forests, in bright woods. Lattices of creepers clung to these, and other trees grew beside them, as well: kunda, kurabaka, asoka, sirisha, kutaja, inguda, kubjaka, svarnayuthi, naaga, punnaga, jaati, mallika, satapatra and maadhavi.

One day, a lord of elephants, the king of his herd, came wandering through the thick jungle and arrived on the banks of the lake on Trikuta. He came with his cows, and on their lumbering way, they trampled bamboo thickets, thorn trees, and clumps of canes overgrown with vines and creepers.

Every other denizen of the forest, all the animals, fled at the very scent of the great tusker. Lion ran, and other pachyderms, tiger and panther, rhinoceros and hippopotamus, hamadryad and python, monkeys with white, black and coloured faces, chamari deer and bears, and all the rest: wolf, boar, bison and little porcupine. For this elephant was indeed master of the jungle.

The smaller creatures and insects still went fearlessly about, for the lordly elephant did not notice them. He was hot and sweaty, it being a summer's steaming day, and he advanced purposively towards the cool lake, the tread of his cows, lesser bulls and calves shaking the ground beneath their massive feet, their vast weight.

He flowed heady ichor from his temples, for he was in musth, and black bees swarmed around him, sipping at the sweet fluid of his rut, while his eyes rolled in inebriation. The great bull elephant was hot, within himself and without, and he and his herd were drawn irresistibly by the sweet water scented with lotus pollen from the golden flowers. He walked straight into the lake and submerged himself. Standing up again, shaking the water from his hide, he dipped his trunk into the tinted blue and, filling the long tube, took it to his mouth and drank long and deeply.

Just like any blind grihasta caught in the Lord's maya, the elephant was heedless of danger lurking very near. He bathed luxuriantly, and made his cows and calves drink from his trunk. Suddenly, he felt his leg seized by inexorable jaws. He stamped his huge foot, then shook it, as pain lanced through him. He shook his leg desperately, but the crocodile that held him was stronger than himself.

Long and hard the elephant king struggled against the leviathan jaws clamped around his leg, while his cows lowed piteously and the calves bleated shrilly. The other bulls tried to rescue their sovereign, but in vain and the great reptile drew him surely into deeper water.

The astonished Devas watched from their heavens in the sky, while the elephant and the crocodile tested their strength against each other, and the contention lasted a thousand years! But the lizard was in his own element and when a thousand years had passed he began to prevail. The elephant grew weaker. The strength of his mind faltered. He felt his battle lost; he felt he would succumb and certainly die. The final hope of escape left his mind.

As his final resistance melted, there came a new awakening in his spirit: *destiny holds me helpless in his jaws, I seek sanctuary in the Lord Brahma and Vishnu, in all the Gods!* He sought refuge in God, whom even death obeys and fears," said Suka Deva to Parikshit.

THE HYMN OF GAJENDRA

"GAJENDRA, THE LORD OF ELEPHANTS, FELL INTO DHYANA, AND BEGAN to chant a great mantra he had learnt and chanted in another birth.

'Aum! Namo Bhagavate tasmai yatha ethachittaatmakam;
Purushaayaadi beejaaya pareshaaya abhidheemahi;
Yasminnidam yathashvedam yenedam ya idam svayam;
Yo asmaat parasmaacha parastam prapadye svayambhuvam...

I salute the Holy One, who gives unconscious nature consciousness. He is Prakriti and Purusha, Nature and Soul. He pervades everything and is the Source of it all. I seek refuge in that eternal Being, from whom the universe has sprung, in whom it exists, who is its cause, whose manifestation it is, who still transcends the universe, both as cause and effect.

He is the immaculate consciousness; he is the ubiquitous witness. By his maya, he has created this cosmos, which all of us see in its manifest state, and the wise see its primal cause. But He sees both, together. He is the first and fundamental awareness and from him all other, lesser consciousnesses arise, like bubbles upon a river: the individual jivas.

In that One I seek my home, my shelter, in him who is beyond the loftiest conceptions of what he is. When Kaala, Time, has inexorably destroyed all the galaxies, their guardians and all the Gods, absorbed them again into their latent condition, only the darkness of dissolution remains. He is the Light that shines in that primeval darkness, undimmed, the light of pure consciousness, the First and Final Light of lights.

An audience cannot recognise an actor on a stage for himself, because of his makeup and deportment. So, too, not the Devas or the wisest Rishis fathom *the Lord's roles, his presence in this world, for his wonderful disguises and performances: his yogamaya. Then how can any ordinary man penetrate his inscrutable ways?*

May that Lord whom none know save me! May he, for whose sake the Sages live in the hearts of forests, lives of detachment, celibacy and of compassion, protect me.

He is never born, nor does he ever do anything. He has no name, form, or prakriti; but he assumes all these with his maya, occasionally to create, preserve and destroy the universe: his cosmic sport! I worship that Lord!"

All this flowed resonantly from the elephant in mortal peril, as the monstrous crocodile dragged him into deeper water.

"I salute the Brahman, who is formless, yet assumes all these myriad forms. I salute God, who is beyond the mind's grasp. I salute the Indweller, the Atman, who gives us all consciousness and salvation.

I salute him, who assumes the gunas of Prakriti, and appears as sattva, rajas and tamas, yet remains immaculate, changeless, the essence of pure chitta. I worship You, who are the Lord of all, the final Witness, the Original One, source of the Atman and Prakriti.

I worship You, who watch over the senses, who make all imagination and its realisation possible. I worship You, whose Truth and Nature are known only as their reflections in this cosmos. You are he whose shadow is this universe.

I bow to You, who are the cause of causes, and without any cause yourself. I prostate before You, who are the sea into which the scriptures flow like rivers and find their rest and meaning, their completion.

You are the ecstasy of moksha; You are the goal of every seeker. You are the spirit fire hidden inside the aranis, the fire-sticks that are the gunas. You dwell in the Soul, which is beyond the laws and prohibitions of the Vedas.

You are he that severs the umbilical bonds of ignorant beasts like me. You are he that is always free, always awake, and always vigilant. Your infinite mercy saves your bhaktas, for you shine as a sacred particle in every creature, the Gyanatman!

Men who are attached to their bodies, to their wives and children, families, to wealth, property and possessions do not approach you easily. But those who *are wise intuit your presence in their hearts, the moment they turn their vision inward.*

Lord, who are beyond the gunas, You are he who bestows dharma, artha, kama and moksha, in your own great good time. Who always give your bhaktas so much more than what they pray for. Immortal, omnipotent Lord, I beg you, save me both from the crocodile and from samsara!

I sing his praises, whom the greatest bhaktas praise in abandon and rapture, singing his incarnations and legends, without desire for anything but to thus sing, not wanting even nirvana. I sing his praises, whose deeds are incomparable. I sing of the Brahman, the deathless One, Lord of Gods, of him that cannot be seen with the mind or the senses, but who can be gained with bhakti. I sing the subtle, eternal One, the primordial, perfect One, who is closer to one's heart than oneself, but is so distant to the evil and the unevolved.

From an atom of You the Deva hosts have come, the Vedas, and all the mobile and inert universe. From You, like sparks from fire, rays from the sun, the higher aspects of nature have sprung — the intellect, the mind, the senses and bodies; into You they are finally absorbed.

You are not Deva or Asura, not man or beast, not woman or eunuch. You are not an attribute or a creation, neither being nor un-being. You are what remains after everything is else destroyed, beyond sunya, the void. Of You I sing, O Lord!

Lord, I do not want to live anymore. I see clearly now that there is little use living in this beast's great body, which, with its screens of ignorance, hides the spirit from within and from without. Don't save me from the crocodile, O God, but from ignorance, from samsara that blinds me to my own true nature. Time will never rescue me from this blindness, but only your grace and light.

I prostrate before the Maker of the worlds, who are the Form of the cosmos, which is your divine game, your lila. I prostrate before the Soul of the universe, the Un-born, pervasive One: the Final Condition, beyond which there is no other.

I bow to You who are the Guru and the goal of all yoga. I bow to You whom the greatest Yogis find in their hearts, men that have been freed from *all their karma by keeping the Bhagavata Dharma, God's path, by fixing their minds in constant dhyana on You.*

Again and again, I prostrate before You, who have the triune shakti of inexorable power. Your strength is infinite, who are manifest as this universe of all things that are seen and understood, who are always a sanctuary for your bhaktas, but who are distant from those that do not care to restrain their senses and their passions.

All this sense of ego and self are generated only by your maya, your illusion. For in truth, everything is You, whose power and glory are eternal, primordial. Aum, I worship You, O pristine and formless Brahman!'

When the elephant king invoked the Brahman, the Holy Spirit that has no describable attribute, no other God appeared there, but Vishnu, who is that Ultimate Spirit embodied, the Soul of all souls, the God of Gods.

Mahavishnu, resplendent, flew down to the elephant king. The Lord came riding his Golden Eagle, Garuda, who is the Veda incarnate. With him came a host of Devas, who sang his praises in wonderful voices. His leg held savagely in the great lizard's jaws, in absolute agony, pain searing him to the last frontier of endurance, the elephant with a mighty effort still drew up a lotus from the water and offered it with his trunk to blue Vishnu.

In a quivering voice, tears streaming down his face, he managed to say in his resonant tongue of the king of beasts, 'Narayana, Viswaguru, I worship You!'

With a cry Vishnu sprang down from Garuda's back and drew the elephant king out from the lake. The crocodile still clung to his leg, with jaws clamped deep into the elephant's limb. Vishnu cut open the crocodile's mouth with his flaming chakra, and set Gajendra, the elephant king, free before all the Devas," said Suka to the king of the Kurus, the king of men.

THE LINEAGE OF GAJENDRA

SUKA CONTINUED, "WHEN VISHNU INCINERATED THE CROCODILE'S jaws to free his bhakta Gajendra, and show his love for all that worship him, Brahma, Siva, the Devas, the Rishis and the Gandharvas, all the celestial ones, poured down a storm of petal rain over the elephant king and the Blue God: in joy, in celebration, in worship. Fine drum rolls sounded; Gandharvas sang and danced, in rapture. The Munis, Charanas and Siddhas sang praises of the Paramatman.

When Vishnu's chakra struck the crocodile, and it died, there was a flash of light and the monstrous lizard's carcass vanished and in its place a most wonderful being stood: the great Gandharva vina vidwaan, the incomparable maestro Huhu. The beast was none other than that great elf, cursed once by the Rishi Devala to be a crocodile for a time. At Vishnu's touch, he resumed his original splendid form, prostrated before the Blue God and began singing his praises in the most melodious voice. *You are the immortal One,* Huhu sang, *the only renowned One, the Supreme One, for whom no eulogy is enough.*

Huhu made a pradakshina around the Lord and then lay at his sacred feet again, whose touch liberates. Vishnu raised a palm over him in blessing, and freed from his sins, the celestial minstrel vanished back to his home in the magic realm of the Gandharvas."

Parikshit wanted to know, "And what happened to Gajendra, the elephant king?"

"The Lord's touch emancipated the great Gajendra; now he had a body and form like Vishnu's own. He was four-armed, with a conch, mace, disk and bow in his blue hands, a vanamala round his throat, and a bright yellow silk robe round his body.

In his previous life, Gajendra was a famous king of the Dravida kingdom; his name was Indrayumna. He was a devout Vishnubhakta and performed every ritual associated with the worship of the Lord. Once, Indrayumna went to an asrama on Kulachala, the Malaya Mountain, and sat there in dhyana, wearing jata and keeping a vow of mowna, his mind fixed on Mahavishnu, the Deathless.

One day, the Muni Agastya arrived in that hermitage with a small band of his disciples. Indrayumna remained absorbed in his meditation, and he did not seem to notice that he had a most illustrious visitor, worthy of his reverence. Agastya cursed the Rajarishi, 'This fool has insulted us all, and he shall be cast down into the depths of ignorance and darkness! He is as dull and slow as an elephant; an elephant let him become.'

Agastya walked away from the tapasvin king, and his sishyas followed him. Indrayumna was distraught, but only for a moment. Then, he consoled himself that, like everything else, what had transpired was only God's will, and his own destiny.

Very soon, Indrayumna found himself born as an elephant. He grew into a magnificent tusker, the patriarch of his herd, but of his spiritual nature, his past life, his bhakti, he remembered nothing. He was only a mighty elephant, his deep and fine spirit obscured by the identity of the curse. Yet, in his final moment of anguish, just before he succumbed to the crocodile, his deepest memories came boiling to the surface of his mind and in that remembrance, he cried out to his God, Vishnu.

Having set Gajendra free, and given him a form like his own and made him one of his own attendants, Vishnu climbed onto Garuda's back again and flew back to his Vaikuntha, at the speed of time.

Parikshit, those who listen to this legend of the Blue Lord shall be spiritually purified. The evils of the kali yuga shall have no power over them, and in time they will surely find freedom from the bonds of samsara, and moksha for themselves.

Brahmanas that are concerned about their spiritual evolution chant the legend of Gajendra, especially the elephant king's hymn, his stotra to the Lord. They do this during the first sandhya of the day, in the morning after their ablutions.

On the day he freed Gajendra, Vishnu declared before all the Devas and Rishis that were with him: *Those that remember you, noble Gajendra, during their morning worship, this lake and forest, these caves, these thickets of bamboo and cane, the ravening crocodile and me – I myself will take all their sins from them.*

Let my bhaktas remember these mountains, and the peaks where Brahma, Siva and I dwell, the Kshirasagara upon which I lie, the lustrous white continent, Swetadwipa, which is mine and dear to me, the Srivatsa, my Devi's mark of love whorled on my chest. Let them keep in their dhyana images of my wildflower garland, my crimson Kaustubha, my mace the Kaumodaki, my Sudarshana Chakra, my sea conch the Panchajanya, my Garuda, my Anantasesha: for all these are parts of me, my own selves.

Let my bhaktas think constantly of my Devi Lakshmi, my son born from the Lotus that sprouted from my navel, my son Brahma, the Creator. Let my worshippers remember my finest bhakta, the blithe Narada, my amsa, the incomparable Bhava and Prahlada, greatest among bhagavatas!

Let my devotees fix their minds upon my Avataras, the Matsya, Kuurma, Varaha, Vamana and all the others, each one divine, every one a saviour. Let them reflect upon the deeds of these incarnations. Let them meditate upon my other amsas, my visible manifestations – Surya, Soma and Agni Deva.

Best of all, let those that would come to freedom contemplate Pranava, the sacred syllable AUM, which I am and which is me. Let them worship Pradhana, the root of all matter, holy cows, the Kamadhenus, the Rishis and Sanatana Dharma, eternal truth, timeless righteousness.

The daughters of Daksha, who married Dharma Deva, Chandra Deva and the Rishi Kashyapa are worthy of worship, as are the sacred rivers of the earth, *especially the foremost of them: Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati and Nanda. They are Devis, Goddesses that wash a soul of its sins.*

Indra's four-tusked white elephant, Airavata who traverses the sky, must be worshipped; as must Dhruva be and the Saptarishi, the other Brahmarishis, born from Brahma's thought, and indeed every saintly Muni.

Let any bhakta think of all these every morning, with faith that they are living parts of me, and he shall find release from his sins and become a liberated one, a jivanmukta. And to those that offer me this stotra at night, too, I promise a clear heart and a final understanding of the nature of truth before their lives end.

With this, Mahavishnu blew a long note on his Panchajanya, so the four quarters shook and the Gods and the Sages with him were again lost to themselves in a surging tide of bliss beyond their understanding," said the peerless Suka.

BEFORE THE CHURNING OF THE KSHIRASAGARA

WHEN HE FINISHED RECOUNTING THE STORY OF GAJENDRA, LEGEND full of secret power and meaning, which surely consumes the sins of a hundred lives, the immortal Vyasa's son said, "Kshatriya, would you now hear about the Raivata Manvantara from me?"

Parikshit was eager, and the Rishi resumed his *Bhagavata Purana*, "Raivata was the Manu of the fifth Manvantara. He was the younger brother of Tamasa, who was Manu of the previous Manvantara. Raivata's sons were called Arjuna, Bali and there were others as well. Vibhu was the Indra of that epoch, the Devas were called Bhutarayas and the Saptarishi were Hiranyaroma, Vedasiras, Urdhvabahu and their brothers.

Vishnu incarnated himself in this Manvantara as the son of Subhra and Vikuntha. He was called Vaikuntha and the Devas also called Vaikunthas were born at the same time.

His consort the Devi Rema asked him to create a home for them, and the Blue One created the immortal realm Vaikuntha, which is the highest and most perfect of all worlds, and where they still dwell, Mahavishnu and Sri Lakshmi. After they visited the blessed place, the Munis Sanaka, Sanatana and their brothers have sung the praises of Vaikuntha. Yet, they have all said that, just as He and the Devi Sri are, the world of Vishnu is also ineffable, beyond words, beyond imagination.

Chakshusha's son, Chaakshusha, became the sixth Manu. His sons were Puru, Purusha and Sudyumna. The Indra of this Manvantara was

Mantradruma; Aapya and his people were the Devas, and the Saptarishi were Havisman, Veeraka and some others.

In the sixth Manu's epoch, Vishnu incarnated in amsa as the son of Vairaja and Sambhuti's son; his parents named him Ajita, the indomitable. Also, in this Manvantara, Vishnu helped the Devas to churn the Kshirasagara, the ocean of milk and to drink the amrita, the nectar of immortality, that lay buried beneath its bed.

The elemental gods used the Mountain Mandara as their churning rod and the Lord came in his Avatara of the pristine Tortoise, the Kuurma, and supported the mountain on his continental shell, to prevent it from sinking, as the Gods and Demons churned."

The king asked, "How did the Lord come to churn the sea of milk? Why did he do this? I have head of this legend of Vishnu, and I am keen to hear its every detail. Ah, wisest Suka, your Purana is for me like amrita. How it cools my mind that the fires of samsara burned without let!" '

Said Suta Ugrasravas. He continued his Purana to the Rishis of the Naimisa vana, 'Suka Deva began the tale of the Amrita.

"Once the awesome Durvasa Muni cursed Indra and at once Indra himself, all his Devas and the three realms lost their grace and lustre. They became wan and weak; the Gods and their hosts became mortal. Seeing their chance, the Devas' inveterate enemies, the Asuras, led by their mighty and savage king Bali, swarmed into Indra's Devaloka, attacked and routed the Devas, killing many of their previously invincible warriors of light.

Driven from their city, Amravati, the main Devas, Indra, Surya, Agni, Vayu, Varuna and some others, held a secret council on earth below, to decide what they should do. They felt weak in all their limbs from Durvasa's curse. They felt helpless as children. Up they flew north to the summit of golden Mount Meru, where the four-faced Lord Brahma sat in his sabha.

The Devas prostrated themselves before their Creator, their Father, and they said piteously, 'Save us, Pitama, we are undone!'

Brahma saw the magnificent Indra, Vayu and the rest pale and dejected, more like beggars than Gods. He saw and sensed how, with the Devas, the powers of light and grace waned across the worlds and those of evil and darkness waxed strong. Why, Brahma felt the darkness that spread like wildfire across his creation touch his own heart with a pang.

Brahma withdrew his thought into himself; he sank into dhyana, meditating upon the Paramatman, the Soul of souls. Slowly, his four faces lit up in hope and faith.

Brahma said to the Devas, 'Let us seek refuge in the Unmanifest One, the Paramatman of whom Rudra and I are but amsas. Let us seek out the One who came as the first Purusha, the first Avatara of the Parabrahman.

The Prajapatis, Marichi and the others, are mere amsas of a minute amsa of that Purusha that I am. Yet, these Prajapatis have peopled all the galaxies with every kind of creature, with gods and demons, with every species born from egg and womb, and plants, great and small, that germinate from seeds.

The Paramapurusha is not partial to any of his creations, nor is he inimical to any. He neglects none, nor prefers any other. However, he does assume different dominant gunas, during different ages, sattva, rajas and tamas, when he wants to create, nourish or destroy the universe.

This is a time when the Lord has assumed an aspect of sattva, as his ruling guna, for he wants creation to be full of grace and purity and to prosper. This is not a time for Demons to rule, so let us take our trouble to the Blue One. Surely, he will favour us in this matter and find a way out of your predicament for you. This is an age when the Deva is meant to rule and Vishnu will help you do just that.'

Brahma and the Devas flew to Vaikuntha, where the Blue God dwells, where no ignorance comes. Drawing his thought inward in dhyana, the four-faced Pitama of the universe solemnly recited a sloka in praise of Mahavishnu, whom no one had ever seen but whose bhaktas had only experienced in their hearts by devotion and mystic intuition.

Said the Lord Brahma, Creator of constellations, '*Avikriyam Satyam Anantamaadhyam; Guhashayam Nishkalampratarkyam. Manograyaanam Vachasaaniruktam; Namaamahe Devavaram Varennyam.*

We worship You who are the highest, most beloved One, who have no beginning or end. You are the one without decay; You are the truth, beyond description beyond conception, beyond all debate.

You are he that is swifter than the mind, the indivisible One that lives in the depths of the heart. We come to seek sanctuary in You, who are the witness of the living breaths, the mind and the intellect and the ego, too. You manifest yourself as the senses and their objects; yet You always remain incorporeal and are beyond the states associated with the body – waking, sleep, dreams; beyond knowledge and ignorance, too.

You are ubiquitous as cosmic ether, the akasa that is everywhere. You incarnate yourself in the ages of sattva, rajas and tamas.'

Soft ecstasy possessing him now, Brahma continued spontaneously, fervidly, 'I seek refuge in You, who are the eternal truth and also the focus that preserves the individual jiva during its transmigratory lives and deaths, until the embodied self dissolves in You, the Paramatman, and finds freedom and perfection.

You are the axle around which the jiva's lives, deaths and fortunes revolve. The jiva's turning wheel of time consists mainly of mind, and You are he that spins this wheel, quick as light with your maya.

The jiva's wheel has fifteen spokes – the indriyas, the senses and their inner content, and the five vital breaths, the pranas. It has three naves, which are the three gunas of Prakriti: sattva, rajas and tamas. It has eight fellies – Prakriti, Mahatattva, Ahamkara and the five Tanmatras.

Always next to all the jivas, You, the Lord, stand – their most intimate well-wisher and friend, You who are primordial, immaculate and untainted Consciousness, whom ignorance never approaches, the subtlest One, the endless One who contains all creation, time and everything that is and is not beyond these, as well. You contain these as an atom of yourself, less.

We have come seeking sanctuary in You, to whom the Rishis strive to attain, riding the chariots of their dhyana.

We seek refuge in the One whose yogamaya deludes every living creature, so they believe they are the body and not the soul. None of the living can escape the power of that maya. Only He rules the Goddess of illusion, who is his own nature, a part of him.

We bow to him, who is pervasive, yet is unaffected by this and remains the supreme transcendent Master. Even the Gods, I, Brahma and the Devas, who are created almost entirely from the sattva guna, cannot plumb his Spirit, even when He plainly reveals himself, as the world outside and consciousness within.

What then can demons and men, whose natures are mainly rajas and tamas, know of the Paramatman? We worship that Supreme Person, Lord, You!

You created this earth, to be your feet, with its four kinds of living creature – the womb-born, the egg-born, the sweat-born and the seed-born. Bless us, O Parabrahman, who are absolutely free, who are freedom embodied, whose grandeur and wonders are infinite!

Your semen is the ekarnava, the cosmic sea of the first origin. From this font do all the worlds and all their masters derive life and power. From this substance the universe comes into being and flourishes.

Lord, the Veda says your mind is Soma, the Moon, from whom all the races of heaven derive their nourishment, their strength and their longevity. Soma is the God of all green things, the plants, trees and flowers of the three worlds, who nurtures the living beings of the earth, too, and makes them grow.

I prostrate myself before the Supreme Lord, whose face is Agni, who is he that gives fortune and wealth, who enables the Vedic yagna, who also consumes the offerings from the sacrifice. Bless us, Lord, look kindly upon us!

Your right eye is the Sun, Surya Deva, lord of Devayaana, the way of spiritual evolution, the visible symbol of the Brahman. I salute the Brahman who is the portal to salvation, who is immortal and who is also Death. May You, O Lord, bless us!

You are Prana, the breath of the stars, the energy of the galaxies. We follow You as his subjects do a king. Vayu flows from You and becomes the individual prana, which enables life and gives vitality to the body, its senses and the mind. May You, O eternal Breath of Life, bless and favour us!

From your hearing, the four quarters came into being; from your heart the body's cavities sprang; akasa was born from your navel, akasa that is the foundation of breath, the senses, the mind, life itself, the body, why everything. Be gracious to us, O infinitely glorious One!

From your might, Indra the powerful was born; by your grace the Devas were created; from your anger Rudra came; from your intellect Lord Brahma; from the orifices of your cosmic body the Vedas and the Rishis; from your sexual organ the Prajapatis. Bless us always, O infinite, glorious One!

From your eternal breast the Devi Lakshmi arose, from your shadow the manes, from your chest dharma, adharma from your back, heaven, Devaloka from your head, and the Apsaras from your playfulness. Be propitious to us, O Brahman!

The brahmana and the Veda flowed from your face, from your arms the kshatriya and strength, the vaisya and deftness from your thigh, the sudra and loyal service from your sacred feet. May you, O eternal Spirit, always be merciful to us!

Greed was born from your upper lip, and from the lower one satisfaction; lustre came from your nose, carnal fulfilment from your touch; Yama, death, was born from your brow, and kaala, time, from your eyelids. Lord of infinite grandeur, bless us, bless us!

Your yogamaya created the five elements and this unimaginable universe – your maya that none but the enlightened can penetrate. Bless us, O infinitely glorious One!

I salute You, who are beyond your own manifestations and their incalculable majesties, who are perfectly absorbed in your own inner bliss and freedom, who are beyond the effects of the universe and its senses created by your maya. This infinite cosmos is all your sport and you are as unaffected by it as akaśa is by everything that it pervades.

We have come to You for sanctuary. We beg You to show yourself to us, in such kindly form as we are able to bear seeing. All-powerful One, through the chasmal ages of the universe, You incarnate in different Avataras and accomplish tasks that we ourselves cannot. Beings that perform karma out of desire find some good for themselves, but also, often, great harm.

But those that work and offer all that they do as worship to You are forever blessed, even if what they do be apparently inconsequential.

You, the indweller, are the jiva's only true friend and making an offering of karma to You is like pouring water at the roots of a great tree – it amounts to watering all its branches and leaves. I bow to You, O inscrutable One, whom nobody can ever begin to fathom. Though in this yuga You manifest yourself essentially as the sattva guna, in truth You are beyond the gunas, equally the controller of all three,' ended Brahma," Suka said.

THE LATER HYMN OF BRAHMA

SUKA CONTINUED, "WHEN HE WAS PRAISED THUS BY THE FOUR-FACED Creator, Mahavishnu, Lord of them all, appeared before Brahma and the Devas. He was as lustrous as a thousand suns. The dazzled Devas could see nothing but his light. They saw not sky, earth or one another; how then could they see the Lord Himself, who was that mass of light?

Brahma and Siva saw a Blue Form, so deep-hued that he was like some unimaginable emerald. His eyes were reddish, like the inner part of a crimson lotus. He wore yellow silk, like molten gold. His limbs were mighty and beautiful. His face was incomparable. He wore a scintillating crown, worked with jewels like no others to be found anywhere, as were his armlets, bracelets, girdle, anklets and the original ruby, the Kaustubha on his chest, was like a great drop of his blood.

His cheeks were bright and his earrings were brilliant; both added to the lambency of his face like some incredible lotus. The Devi Lakshmi leaned against his chest, garlanded with a vanamala, and his weapons, like the Sudarshana, the Kaumodaki and the Saringa, surrounded him – divine, embodied beings.

The Devas fell on their faces before that Form and now Brahma eulogised Vishnu again.

'Ajaatajanmasthitisamaayaagunaaya Nirvanaskharnavaaya;
Anoranimnepariganyadhamne Mahaanubhaavaaya namo namaste.

I salute You again, O Great Being, who are birthless yourself but cause the origin, the nurture and destruction of the universe. You are the ocean of ecstasy, untainted by the changes of prakriti and her gunas. You are subtler than the subtlest division of an atom, yet You are infinite existence, who transcends space and time.

Supreme One! O Creator, I see this Form of Yours, manifest for the first time ever. I see that You can be worshipped as this Blue Being by all the living that seek mundane and transcendent treasure, who follow the paths of yoga that the Vedas and the Tantras describe.

This wondrous Blue Form is ambiguous, Lord! For though it appears limited, I see all creation, the three realms contained in it. I see Rudra and myself and the Devas contained in You. As a pot and the earth of which it is made, the cosmos always existed in You latently, manifests in You and is finally dissolved back into You.

Beyond even the Pradhana, You are the beginning, the middle and the end of the universe. All this and we ourselves are made just of your maya, and by the power of that maya, you reside everywhere, in us all. Only those that look deep within themselves, the sage that find true discrimination, become aware that though You infuse all this none of it affects or changes You. You transcend all the sublime evolution that matter undergoes; You remain as You always were and shall be – immaculate.

The greatest Munis say that even as fire is found in arani sticks, milk in cows, grain in the soil, water in the ground and a livelihood in toil, so too do seekers find You hidden in themselves and everywhere. You are the ubiquitous Spirit that quickens all – the unity that is the body-mind and all the other effects of Prakriti.

Lord, You are he from whose navel the Lotus grows, which is the support of all the worlds! And today, why, we are like wild elephants in flight, seared by the thirst and terror of a forest-fire, which arrive on the banks of the cool waters of the Ganga. We see You before us and we are overwhelmed by joy. We beg You, grant us the refuge which Siva, I and the Lokapalas have come seeking at your lotus feet.

You dwell within us and without; You are omniscient and know our inmost, subtlest thoughts. You are like the eternal fire of which Rudra, the Devas and I are sparks. You know why we have come here today, in what need. Yet, You are the only one that can decide what must be done, for our understanding is limited and we see poorly and none too far.

Lord, we came with an urgent desire in our hearts. But seeing You, our anxiety cools and we know that You will do what is best for us all. I will not explain why we first came, nor ask you for any favour. For You know everything and You will do what is best for the three worlds, the Devas and the Rishis.'

Vishnu listened in silence and calm to what Brahma said and a slight smile played upon the Blue God's lips. Now he spoke to the Devas who stood with folded hands before him, in a voice deep as thunder among the stars.

'O great Gods, listen to me, what I say is for your own welfare, strange though it might seem! Go now and make peace with your enemies, the Asuras, for it happens that this is a time that favours them, transiently. You cannot defeat them in battle at the moment and must wait until fortune turns your way again.'

They looked startled, but made no objection and Vishnu continued, 'When there is some sweet common objective to be achieved even the worst enemies must turn friends. At the moment you have more need of the Demons that they do of you. Befriend them as the serpent did the mouse, for just as long as mutual need endures. The mouse gnawed a hole in the snake charmer's basket, but once the serpent left the basket it hunted the mouse again.'

By now the Devas, and even Brahma and Rudra, looked utterly bewildered. Vishnu said, 'It is the amrita that you must seek, O Devas! For if you drink the amrita, you will be immortal again and then you may vanquish the Asuras in war and rule heaven and earth once more.

The nectar of immortality sleeps beneath the bed of the kshirasagara, the ocean of milk. You must cast every emetic herb you can find into the milky sea, then churn the waves using Mount Mandara as your churning rod and Vasuki, the Naga king, as your rope! I, too, shall come to help you with the churning, so that you will not tire until you have the amrita. Still you cannot accomplish this thing on your own.

You need the Demons' help. So go and make peace with them. Tell them of the great enterprise you intend and seek their help humbly. Swear that you will share the nectar equally and anything else of value that the churning of the magic sea might yield. But know in your hearts that once the amrita is churned up, only you Devas shall drink of it.

However unreasonable or haughty the Demons' demands may seem to you, agree to anything. Finally, you will triumph over them.'

Slowly, the import of what he was saying dawned on the Devas. Wan smiles, of hope and relief that they would indeed find help from the Blue God, appeared on their strained faces. Vishnu went on, 'When you churn the milk, white waves, the Kaalakuta will surface – the first and dreadful venom. Do not fear it. Besides, many other incomparable things will rise from the Kshirasagara, objects of great fascination and power. Do not be attracted to them, nor yield to any desire you might feel for them. If the Asuras refuse to give them to you, make no objection, show no anger.

Remember your objective; what you want is the amrita and for that you must wait.' With this, Vishnu, who alone owns the six immortal majesties, vanished before their eyes. For a long time, Brahma, Rudra and the Devas stood gazing at where he had stood before them, blue and perfect, so blissful. Then, Brahma and Rudra left for their exalted realms, while the Devas took themselves to Bali, emperor of the Asuras.

The Demons saw their enemies arrive at their gates, unarmed and with no army. Excitedly, they seized up weapons and prepared to decimate the Gods of light. But their king, the noble Bali, stopped them from attacking the Devas. Instead, Virochana's son, who had subdued the three worlds, had his enemies shown into his lavish court.

Bali sat on his incomparable throne, surrounded by rings of ferocious demon guardsmen. The haughty Indra approached that throne meekly, for all the worlds that Bali ruled, like a supplicant. So mildly, in such soft speech, Indra addressed the great Asura, at times even bowing before him. In that way, he told him everything that Vishnu had said about the amrita and the other priceless things that lay at the bottom of the Kshirasagara.

He told Bali how, if they strove together, the Devas and the Asuras could churn all these up and divide them equally among themselves.

Of course, Indra did not mention the story of the serpent and the mouse and what he said brought a glint of lust to Bali's eyes. Bali's commanders Sambara, Arishtanemi and the others were obviously stirred by what Indra said; they, too, desired everything that lay below the waves of the ocean of milk. The demons knew that by themselves they could not hope to churn the sagara. They knew that after Durvasa Muni's curse the Devas were no match for them in war. So once the treasures and the nectar had been churned up, what was to prevent the Asuras from keeping it all?

Bali rose and grasped Indra's hand in apparent friendship; he agreed that Devas and Asuras, the two great races of creation, would collude to churn the ocean for the amrita of immortality. Straightaway, some climbing into magnificent vimanas, others onto the backs of mounts strange, grand and swift, and yet others flying themselves with neither mount nor skycraft, they flew in a dark and bright swarm to Mandara, golden mountain at the centre of the earth.

They worshipped the mountain and then, with mighty arms, drew that massif up by its roots, hoisted it onto shoulders and backs of divine and monstrous strength, and began the long journey to the sea. A goodly way they went, but then their awesome burden became insupportable. It descended upon the hosts of darkness and light, crushing thousands.

Then, with a huge flapping of immense wings, golden Garuda flew down from the sky. Blue Vishnu, four-armed and magnificent, rode upon his back. With just a look from his eye, Vishnu healed the wounded Devas and Asuras. He lifted up Mandara as if it was a feather, with one hand. He raised the demons, gods and their people crushed under it, back into life. Vishnu set Mandara upon Garuda's back and they flew like an arrow to the sea of milk.

The Devas and Asuras now climbed into their skyships, onto their mounts, others flew themselves with magic, and they, too, came to the white ocean. There, Garuda set the golden mountain down and, bowing to his Master, flew up into the sky and vanished swiftly as a thought."

KAALAKUTA

SUKA CONTINUED, "NOW, THE KINGS OF THE GODS AND THE DEMONS, Indra and Bali, flew down into the deepest underworld, glimmering patala, where Vasuki, emperor of Nagas, the great serpents, reigned. They came in a fabulous vimana and begged that Snake to become their churning rope, as Vishnu wanted. When they offered to let him drink some amrita and be immortal himself, Vasuki was tempted and agreed.

He, too, spread vast wings and arrived on the shore of the sea of milk. In high spirits now, Demon and God wound the Naaga round the slopes of Mandara, set the golden mountain afloat and prepared to churn even as a milkmaid does her milk for cheese!

At first, though, Vishnu held Vasuki's mammoth head and the Devas stood with him. But the proud and sensitive Asuras protested: they were the firstborn race of creation; they had crushed the Devas in battle. The mighty Demon generals said among themselves, 'We are highborn. We know the Veda backwards. We shall not hold the serpent's tail!' And they stood apart.

With a smile, Vishnu relinquished Vasuki's head and gave it to Bali to hold. He went round to the Naaga's tail and took it, and the Devas with him. Kashyapa Muni's sons by Danu, Diti and Aditi, began to churn the sea of waves. Holding the stupendous serpent aloft, they pulled it back and forth with all their strength, so the mountain out upon the waves turned round, first one way and then the other.

But weighty Mandara had no support at its roots and inevitably began to sink. The Devas' faces fell; the Asuras were dismayed. Then Vishnu appeared among the waves in another Avatara – he came as the original Tortoise, the Kuurma. The strange and beautiful Creature, which was a thousand yojanas long and wide, swam like a fish under the gold mountain and supported it upon its shell big as a large island!

The Devas and the Asuras began to churn in right earnest, drawing Vasuki back and forth with elemental strength. Supported by Vishnu the Tortoise, Mandara seemed just like a natural mountain in the sea – a golden mountain of a thousand peaks. As the Gods and Demons strained themselves, the Kuurma felt the whirling of the mountain as if someone were delightfully scratching or tickling its back.

Vishnu appeared unnoticed at the head and tail of the Naaga, the Rope, as both a Deva and an Asura, and poured his infinite might into the churning. Hari entered the Serpent king as an anaesthetic, so Vasuki felt no pain as he was dragged to and fro like lightning across the crags of Mandara.

As the churning quickened, the golden mountain began to sway precariously from side to side and was in danger of toppling over. In a flash, Vishnu appeared in a great Blue Form in the midst of the sea of milk. He pressed down upon the very pinnacle of Mandara with one of a thousand hands, steadying it.

Brahma and the celestial Rishis gathered in the sky above the sea and the shore of that unprecedented enterprise. And in thrall they rained a shower of unearthly petals on the Blue One, the Paramatman, who appeared in many forms and lent determination to Deva and Asura, who might otherwise have faltered.

The churning grew more frenzied, like some indescribably fervid dance. Pale waters stood up tall as peaks around Mandara and the denizens of the ocean swam away in panic from the churning. Though Vishnu had numbed any pain he might have felt, Vasuki now felt dizzy and helplessly he vomited up smoke and fire from his cavernous jaws. Vishnu smiled. For now, the Paulomas, Kaaleyas, Mahabali himself, Ilvala and the other Asuras, who had insisted on holding the Naaga's head and not its tail, were scorched by the Serpent king's breath and the fire from his eyes. They withered like sarala trees when a forest burns.

Quickly, this searing emanation spread across the beach of moment and the Devas did not escape. They, too, had their faces, their unworldly raiment, and their garlands made of blooms plucked from immortal Nandana turn grey with the heat and the smoke.

Then Vishnu poured down a fine rain on that shore from clouds he summoned into the sky in a moment, dousing Vasuki's fires, washing the Devas and Asuras in that healing shower. Hari also blew a moist and fragrant wind landward from the sea and blew away the black smoke that hung over the shore of fate.

The Gods and the Demons churned for all they were worth, but no amrita surfaced. Again, Vishnu added his infinite strength into the effort. He was blue as the raincloud; his fulvid silken robe was like golden lightning against his deep complexion; his earrings were like fine round sunflares. His hair was long, with exquisite locks in elegant disarray. The wildflower garland around his chest was like a petalled rainbow and his eyes were reddish like kimsuka blossoms.

Mahavishnu was like another mountain as he held Vasuki by his head and tail and spun Mandara round like a top. The creatures of the sea threshed about to escape the whirlpool of the churning, but were drawn inexorably into its vortex and flung up into the air like froth, the biggest of them. Giant squid, timmingalas which are whale-eaters, sea-elephants, alligators so huge one cannot imagine them in this age, and vast whales, too, were sucked in, tossed up helpless and then managed to escape on the outward tide of the churning.

Fish of every hue, size and shape suffered this fate until, suddenly, those milk white waves around Mandara turned dark as twilight and seemed to boil ominously and smoke. The ancestral Poison, the Kaalakuta, devourer of time, also called Haalaahala, rose sizzling to the surface. In moments, its noxious fumes spread everywhere as it spun up and spread on every side as a black cyclone.

It consumed everything it touched, water, air, earth, winds and the fires of the Rishis. It fed on the ethereal akasa. It seemed the Pralaya of the end of the ages had come betimes and the Haalaahala would extinguish all the stars in a few hours.

Led by Brahma, the Prajapatis, Devas, the Rishis, the Asuras and the other divine and demonic races came flying to Siva, who sat in dhyana upon Mount Kailasa. His body was like crystal and he was meditating so he could grant moksha to every jiva, in time. The Devas, Asuras and the Lokapalas prostrated before the perfectly tranquil Siva.

The Prajapatis said, '*Devadeva, Mahadeva, Bhutaatman, Bhutabhaavana; Trahi Na Sharanaapannamas Trailokya Dahanaad Vishaat.*

God of gods, greatest God, O Protector of creation! Save us from the Kaalakuta that has been roused from below the Kshirasagara and burns up the three realms. O you are the lord of our destinies, the master of bondage and liberation. The Rishis worship you as the greatest Guru that takes away the suffering of those who seek sanctuary in You.

O You who pervade all things! You are pure awareness; but when you create, preserve and destroy this universe, You assume your maya with its three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas, and then You are known as Brahma, Vishnu and Siva.

You are the final truth of the Brahman. You are the Soul and the Lord of all worlds, of time. From You this endless universe sprang, in both its latent and manifest forms, sukshma and sthula, spirit and matter. You are the font of the Vedas, which are the Sadbabrahman; You are the source of all the mandalas. You manifest yourself as prana, the senses, their objects and the qualities. You are the sense of self, You are Time, yagnas, the truth and dharma. Prakriti with her three gunas is founded in You.

You embody all the Gods. Agni is your face; Bhumi Devi is your feet like lotuses; Kaala, time, is your movement; the four quarters, the Diks, are your ears; Saagara, the ocean, is your tongue. Mahadeva, the sky is your navel; the wind is your breath; the sun is one of your eyes; water is your semen. The power that supports everything high and low is your ego, the moon is your mind and heaven is your head.

O You who embody the Veda, the seas are your belly, the mountains are your bones. Plants and trees are your hair. The Vedic metres – Gayatri, Trishtubh, Anushtubh, Brihati, Pankti, Jagati and Ushnik – are the seven elements, the dhatus, of your body. Eternal dharma, and all its finest nuances, is your heart. Lord, the five hermetic mantras – Tatpurusha, Aghora, Sadyojata, Vamadeva and Isana – are your five faces and incarnations. From these the other thirty-eight mantras arose.

Siva, You are the ultimate Truth, which illumines Itself; You are the first and final consciousness. Your shadow is the waves of the sea of adharma, the evils like pride, lust, greed and violence. The triguna are your three eyes, one slumbering in your brow. The Veda is a glance from these eyes, illuminating and the source of all knowledge, the origin of all the scriptures.

Sadasiva, eternal One, the Brahman is the Light of lights, where there is no duality – your true Form. Not Brahma, Vishnu, Indra or any of the Devas or Rishis has found or plumbed You as that Brahman, that holiest Spirit. For into that Brahman no gunas enter, nor any trace of them.

Ah, at the end of the Kalpas, You consume the universe and Kaala himself with a spark from your eyes. What is it then to hymn You as he that delivers us from evil while time exists? Surely, You made Kamadeva ashes with a look, as you did the Tripura and Yama himself, Daksha's vile yagna and the Kaalakuta, as well.

There are fools, Lord, that say You are too attached to the Devi Uma, because she is always with you. There are those that mock You for dwelling in smasanas, cremation grounds. The ignorant say that You are ferocious and vulgar. These know nothing of your eternal samadhi or that the greatest masters of the Spirit, who are absorbed in the bliss of the Atman, worship your holy feet. What do they know that all this universe is your sport, Siva?

Not Brahma can fathom your true nishkaala nature, which transcends time and is beyond the laws of cause and effect, of karma. How can we, then, hope to describe You adequately, or praise You? Being limited ourselves, so is our worship and our praise.

Mahadeva, we see only this form of yours because our eyes and minds have not the vision with which to begin to comprehend You in your Other

Form. But we do know that you have assumed this form before us, of Rudra, for the weal of the earth.'

And so they went on and Siva saw how frightened and miserable they were. He pitied them, for of all the great Gods the Lord of Kailasa has the softest heart. Siva turned to Sati at his side, 'Bhavani, they have come in terror of the Kaalakuta. I must help them, for to protect the helpless is the only point to sovereignty. Those whom Hari deludes with his maya are usually inimical to one another, each one desiring the others' ruin. But those that are illumined seek the welfare of all beings.' He paused, for he saw the anxiety and disapproval in her face at what he surely meant to do.

Softly he said, 'Even if it costs them their own life. Vishnu is always pleased when we are kind to those in need, and what pleases Hari pleases me. So, to please myself, I am going to drink this Haalaahala, this great poison that has risen from the depths of the White Sea. And I shall be most pleased because by doing this I will save every creature in creation, for otherwise the venom will certainly consume them all.'

The Devi still looked askance at what he meant to do, but in her sacred heart, she knew that no Kaalakuta could harm her Lord. Siva stood up before the Devas, the Asuras and the Rishis and in a wink he was as tall as the sky. In a flash he gathered all of the smoking venom in his hands, and cupping his palms, quaffed the Kaalakuta in a gulp. At that moment, Siva's heart, O King, brimmed with love for all creation and every creature in it.

Yet, though this was Siva himself who drank that venom, it was fierce and burned his pale throat dark blue. Even he blanched for a moment at its virulence; then his face was tranquil again and full of joy. The shadow passed from it. The Kaalakuta remained in his throat filling it evenly, like some incredible necklet, and then on he was called Nilakanta, too.

The greatest souls feel the suffering of all creatures as their own pain, and this compassion is the highest form of bhakti. When Siva drank the Kaalakuta, risking himself, Brahma, Vishnu, the Devi Sati, all the Gods and Goddesses, all the divine Munis, every Deva and Asura sang his praises fervently.

When Siva drank the Haalaahala, a few drops of it fell out of his hands and this portion of the original venom became the poison of the serpents, scorpions and every other venomous creature and plant in creation," Sri Suka said.

LAKSHMI, AMRITA AND MOHINI

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "AND WHAT HAPPENED NEXT, O PEERLESS SUKA?"

Vyasa's enlightened son continued, "When danger was past, the Devas and Asuras flew back to the Kshirasagara with Vishnu and began churning the milk-white waves again. Once more they hauled Vasuki back and forth, Mandara whirred like a top, the waves were churned potently and the helpless ocean gave up its treasures.

First of all, a lambent creature rose from the water. Her light filled the air – she was the first and sacred cow, dappled Kamadhenu, cow of wishes who gives her owner whatever his heart desires. The Devas and Asuras agreed that she was made for the Rishis; and the Sages had her, for was she not the perfect gift for them? She would give them everything they needed to make their yagnas fruitful, the purest milk and butter, so their offerings, their havis, would be taintless.

Once Kamadhenu had been led away by the Munis, the churning began again and waves stood up in stiff walls of froth. Suddenly, an unearthly neighing filled the sky, like music. A beast whiter than the waves sprang forth, and trod air, tossing its noble head and mane. It was the first horse in creation, white as the full moon – magnificent Uchchaisravas.

Bali saw the magic steed and he wanted it for himself. Indra looked at it and his heart was full of yearning. But Vishnu laid a hand on Indra's arm, restraining him for the time, whispering to him that the horse was not for him and he should wait to see what else was churned up from the sea of dreams. Uchchaisravas came ashore and stood by, while the churners resumed their efforts.

Now the waves parted in an immense rift, as if a continent was surfacing. Another snow-white creature arose from the enchanted water – the first of all elephants, four-tusked, who went as easily through the air as a bird. He was greater than Mount Kailasa and as luminous as Siva's abode; he was Airavata. He, too, stood aside, unclaimed, but Indra's heart burned to have him and he was glad that he had not insisted on taking Uchchaisravas for himself.

The churning resumed and it seemed the waves turned to blood. They were scarlet as sunset, though it was midday and the sky was clear and bright all round. The padmaraga, the ruby Kaustubha, rose like a crimson sun from the waves. It was blinding, it was dark; it was scintillating. Before anyone else could wish for it, Vishnu took it and wore it round his throat, red against deep blue.

Again they churned and now the brilliant tree of wishes and fantasies, the incomparable Parijata, was churned up. To this day, he that finds the Parijata can have anything his heart wants from it. But of course, he who finds the tree of wishes that is planted in Indra's garden, the Nandana, is a rare one. Also, when he actually finds the tree, after many lives' quest, there is no telling what his heart will ask from it!

Sweet light and music filled the quarters as the churners set up their rhythmical hauling again. The very foam they churned seemed to take forms of untold beauty – lovely, seductive female forms! The nymphs known as Apsaras came forth, dancing, from the froth. Wondrous ornaments decked their limbs; they wore diaphanous raiment so little of their lissom charms was hidden. They were so beautiful that Deva, Asura and grave Rishi of the sternest tapasya and self-control was smitten and trembled with lust at the way the Apsaras danced, and at their sensuous merriment, their sidelong and sultry smiles.

All at once, sea, land and sky seemed lit by the light of countless streaks of lightning – pure, dazzling effulgence. The shimmering Devi Lakshmi, Goddess of fortune, rose from the Kshirasagara. She was the source of the blue and blinding light that lit up the four quarters of the sky. Deva, Asura and Rishi were bewitched by her naked beauty, her fine soft skin, her eternal youth, her sublime grace, her lustrousness and her untold sweetness.

They stood agape, while Indra brought her a fine lotus throne. Ganga and the other holy rivers of the earth brought her their sacred waters in shining golden vessels, for her to bathe with. Bhumi Devi appeared with the most fragrant and pure herbs and ablutionaries for her consecration. The cows of the world brought their panchagavya, the five auspicious things they produce. Vasantha, the spring, brought a riot of flowers from the months of Chaitra and Visakha.

The Rishis saw to the arrangements for her to take her first ablution. Gandharvas sang mellifluously and now there were Apsaras to dance ecstatic celebration to the divine music. Indeed, ecstasy seemed to possess all those gathered upon that shore of moment, when the Goddess Sri emerged from the waves, for ecstasy was what she brought with her.

From the sky, also, music of rapture sounded – mridanga, vina and other marvellous instruments. The Diggajas, the elephants of the four Diks, who are the support of the earth, appeared and with their trunks poured holy water over the Devi Lakshmi. The Munis chanted the Vedas, while that Goddess, bathing languorously, a thousand-petalled lotus of the soul in her hand, hearkened to their hymns. When she finished her bath, Varuna of the seas came forward and offered her robes of the finest yellow silk. He brought a vaijayanti wildflower garland made from unfading ocean lotuses, over which black bees swarmed, drunk on the honey from the flowers.

The Prajapati Viswakarman brought the Devi ornaments without compare in the three worlds. The Devi Saraswati brought her a resplendent necklace, upon which the stars themselves seemed to be the jewels. Brahma brought her another mystic lotus, an amsa of the original one in which he was born. He brought her sacred serpents besides, and earrings, with gemstones the likes of which do not exist anywhere else.

Lakshmi now took the vaijayanti maala in her hands and rose from her bath, blushing – she sought a lord for herself, a permanent husband around whose neck she would drape that garland. Her perfect breasts were smeared with golden saffron, powder and paste; her belly was round and flat and the navel in it deep as a well. Her hips swayed wide, as she moved among the Devas and Asuras, seeking her mate fervently, while her anklets chimed. She was like some magical golden creeper. She was the beauty against which all other beauty compares itself.

Long she looked for the one she sought – he who was perfect, like herself, who was Unborn and deathless, whose virtues were also eternal and profound. Among the Gandharvas she sought him, peering long into their faces and hearts with her eyes that perceived all things. Among the avid Yaksha princes, the powerful Asura masters, the grave and evolved Siddhas and Charanas, she went on her quest. She turned away from each one; she turned away from the Devas, too, smiling and entirely charming, yet nonetheless rejecting them.

Passing by all these worthiest of worthy suitors, each one agog for her to choose him, the Devi Sri thought, 'He that has great tapasya, like Durvasa, has yet not quelled his anger. The others, like Sukra Deva, are veritable seas of gyana, yet are attached to small ends and are not free in spirit. Brahma and Soma Deva are called great, and so there are; yet they are lascivious. How can anyone as dependent on another, as Indra is, running to Brahma and Vishnu whenever trouble threatens him, be called Ishwara, the Lord?

There are those that keep dharma faultlessly, as Parasurama does; yet I find he can be heartless, as well. Sibi might have great renunciation, but it has not fetched him moksha. Kartaveeryarjuna certainly has awesome strength, but time will devour him, so his might is an illusion.

The greatest Rishis like Sanaka, Sanatana and the others are perhaps flawless. They are so absorbed in their Atman that neither shall I find any use for them nor they for me. Markandeya is longlived and forever youthful, but ah, he is neither handsome nor attractive. Hiranyaksha is handsome and powerful, but he lives but briefly in every Kalpa.'

Now she looked at Rudra, she looked again and truly he was everything any woman might want. 'But his ways are not for me! He goes naked, lives among bhutas and pretas. His favourite place in the world is in a cremation ground. I could not be with him.'

At last, she came to four-armed Vishnu, standing languidly by, a smile on his lips, the Kaustubha burning like a cosmic blood-drop on his deep blue breast. Lakshmi Devi sighed, her heart quickened within her. She said to herself, 'Ah, look at him! He is perfect for me, but then He is beyond desire, he will have no use for me. He is Atmarama, absorbed in his Atman.'

She looked again and she blushed, for in an instant she lost her heart to him. But then, she sighed again and hesitated with the garland in her trembling hands. She knew him well – *Vavrevaram Savagunair Apekshitam; Rema Mukundam Nirapekshameepsitam*. She, the Devi Rema, chose Mukunda, Vishnu, who was the heart of all eternal virtue, to be her husband.

She saw him as being superior to every other – thus, the only truly independent one. She saw he was beyond the scope of the gunas of Prakriti, yet he owned every auspicious quality. Surely, she saw that he was beyond desire, unattached, yet she felt certain that he would never abandon her since she chose him in trust and faith, in surrender.

Sri Lakshmi walked straight to Vishnu standing calmly by, the faintest smile upon his lips, and she draped her vanamala of immortal lotuses round his neck: forever. She stood before him, her eyes alight, her own smile full of shyness. With her look she asked him to clasp her to his breast and give her sanctuary there for all time and even after time ended. And he did as she wanted; the Lord Vishnu took the Devi Sri to him; he gave his broad chest, his heart, to be her dwelling place. For, of course, she was the mother of the universe, the fount of all power, glory and prosperity.

She melted into him and from his bosom cast her benevolent gaze upon all the children of Swarga, Bhumi and Patala, their guardians and Gods, all their creatures, and creation bloomed in her grace. All around, sublime music swelled from the instruments and throats of Gandharva, Deva, Asura, Rishi. Brahma, Rudra, Angiras and the other Prajapatis flung storms of petals down on the divine couple; they, too, gave loud praise with mantras from the Veda.

When the Devi Lakshmi looked at them, the Devas found that every virtue they were blessed with instantly attained fullness! They and theirs, the Gandharvas, Munis, Siddhas, Charanas, Apsaras and the others that are sattvic by nature found a fresh tide of joy swelling in their hearts. The creatures of darkness also found their natures completed by the glance of the Goddess. Any vestige of modesty, mercy or goodness faded from them. Their wildness, ferocity, greed and lust grew.

They churned again, and now Varuni, goddess of intoxicants, of wine and spirits of every kind, rose from the white waters. She was lotus-eyed; she was lovely. Vishnu allowed the Asuras to take her for themselves. Kashyapa's sons, Devas and Asuras, churned the sea again and now a stunningly handsome man rose from the waves. His arms were long and sturdy; his eyes were reddish even like Vishnu's. His throat bore lines like a shell's. He was blue, just like Vishnu, and youthful, as one of some twenty summers.

He wore a profusion of garlands and golden ornaments and jewels. His chest was wide and deep. His hair was a long mass of fine curls. He wore a yellow silken robe and he strode from the waves like a lion. In his fine hands he bore a crystal chalice, in which the nectar of immortality, the amrita, quietly bubbled.

The splendid young man was Dhanvantari, the original physician, and he was indeed an amsavatara of the Blue God who had first initiated this great enterprise, this churning of the ocean. Dhanvantari was to become the father of Ayurveda, the ancient science of health and medicine, and for this he is entitled to receive a share of the havis that is offered to the Devas at any yagna. He is, thus, counted among the Gods.

The Asuras waited for just the moment it took them to realise who this was and what he brought out from the waves in his dark hands. Then they were upon him in a flash, snatching the chalice of ambrosia from his hands. The dismayed Devas rushed to Vishnu; it seemed their purpose, their subtle design, had been betrayed.

But the Blue God smiled at them. 'Be of good cheer, for only you Devas shall drink the amrita,' said he, calm as ever.

He had hardly said this, when they heard angry voices raised amongst the Demons who had taken the amrita.

One cried, 'I will drink first!'

Another roared, 'No, I will!'

The strongest Asuras grasped the chalice and the weaker ones were afraid that they would not get any nectar to drink. These weaker Daityas said, 'The Devas shared our effort equally. In fairness, they must also drink the amrita. This is the sanatana dharma.'

Just then, out of thin air it seemed, an enchantress materialised among the Gods and Demons. Ah, she was seduction personified. Her complexion was of a deep blue lotus grown on the mirror smooth face of a charmed pool hidden in the heart of an occult forest and never seen by God, Demon or man. She defied describing. Her every limb was perfect and a pang of desire rose in the hearts of anyone who saw her.

Her ears were fine and adorned with fabulous gemstones. Her cheeks glowed darkly and her nose was slender and bridged high. Her breasts were every man's dreams, full, round and they somehow contrived to be more desirable any other woman's breasts ever. Prominent black nipples strained against her sheer blouse. Her waist was as slim as the stalk of a lily; her hips flared away from it, ample as an island! Her belly was flat.

Her breath was so fragrant that honeybees were drawn to her, as to some great flower. Her luminous eyes blinked in fear as they buzzed round her. Her hair was luxuriant, shining, and woven with strings of jasmine. She wore matchless necklaces round her fluted throat and other equally invaluable and exquisite ornaments round her arms.

She wore burning yellow silk round her hips and a fine golden girdle over it. She wore murmuring golden anklets above her delicate feet. She was dark and in her way as lovely as the fair Lakshmi. But while the Devi Sri, who had chosen Vishnu to be her husband, was an embodiment of the sattva guna, of purity, this raincloud-hued beauty was an incarnation of passion and seductiveness.

She smiled shyly, looked at them so flagrantly out of the corner of her eye, and she inflamed Bali and his Asuras as they had never been aroused before. It is said that high winds of lust swept their hearts," said Suka Deva to Yudhishtira's noble grandson, the Kuru king Parikshit.

THE DRINKING OF THE AMRITA

SRI SUKA SAID, "YES, THE ASURAS, WHO WERE WRANGLING AMONG themselves over the amrita like thieves, saw this dusky enchantress, this Mohini, and they surrounded her, with eyes staring and mouths hanging open. They had never seen anyone like her before. They, who had enjoyed the most desirable women of every race demonic and divine, had never been so stirred by just the sight of a woman.

Hissing in approval, slavering and panting they swarmed around her.

One breathed, 'Such lovely skin, such colour.'

Another gasped, 'Such breasts.'

A third said, 'All of her is flawless. She sets my heart alight!'

Yet another murmured, 'And not just my heart.'

Now their king Bali spoke to the enchantress, 'Lotus eyes, my beauty, tell us who you are. Whose daughter are you? Why are you here and from where have you come? Oh, just look at your thighs! And surely, looking at you, we know for sure that you are a virgin. For such unblemished beauty could never have been touched by Deva, Asura, Siddha, Gandharva, Kinnara or Charana. Not the Lokapalas or Prajapatis have laid a finger on you, let alone any mortal man.

Look at your eyes! It seems the good Lord is pleased with his creatures that he has sent you to us. Look at your waist around which I can join my hands.'

He sighed deeply, drinking her into his very soul with his gaze, as she tittered coyly to listen to him. Then, remembering why they were here, remembering the amrita, the Demon king said to the dark seductress, 'All of us here, Devas and Asuras, are brothers, for we are all Kashyapa Muni's sons. Yet, at the moment, we are like mortal enemies because we all want to keep the amrita for ourselves. We strove together to churn the sea to have the nectar. And now here we are ready to kill one another for it. I beg you, lovely one, you be our mentor – share the amrita among us even-handedly.'

She still favoured them with the most delicious glances, of such unabashed invitation. She said in her soft torment of a voice, 'Sons of great Kashyapa, how can you put your trust in a loose woman like me? Don't you see that I am a whore and which wise man will trust a wanton woman? The Rishis say that one might trust a hungry wolf rather than a promiscuous woman.'

They Asuras were pleased at her self-deprecation. They trusted her implicitly now and they laughed happily to listen to what she said. Besides, her voice and her gaze promised so much! Bali held out the chalice with the amrita to her. At first, she would not take it.

She said, 'Only if you swear that you will do as I ask, whatever I ask, will I share the amrita among you.'

They were only too glad to agree. She, the enchantress, took the chalice from Bali's hands. She said, 'You must fast for a day to purify yourselves for the sacred ceremony of drinking the nectar.'

Deva and Asura fasted. The next morning, at dawn, they bathed in the sea, made their offerings to a holy fire, fed the Sages present there, fed the exalted and the lowly, and were blessed by the Munis. Then they put on their finest clothes, wore their costliest ornaments and came to a marvellous hall that Viswakarman created on the shore of fate.

They found seats of auspicious kusa grass upon the floor of the capacious hall. As the Vedas prescribe for any great ceremony, the tips of the blades of grass pointed east, and the Gods and Demons sat facing that direction. Butter lamps lit the hall; it was strewn with masses of flowers and garlands of every sort. Their scent and that of incense filled the air, which echoed with the sound of the waves outside that washed rhythmically ashore.

Then the Mohini entered that hall, her anklets tinkling like birds singing the morning sun. Her breasts were like crystal vases and she bore the chalice of amrita in her hands. Silence fell in the sabha. A bright silken garment covered her lower limbs. She walked slowly, as if she had drunk too much wine and was unsteady on her feet. Her eyes roved this way and that, also as if she was surely intoxicated.

The Devas gazed at her raptly. The Asuras' burning eyes ranged over her, up and down, helplessly, unashamedly. As she came, her upper cloth slipped away and her breasts were exposed. A communal sigh filled the sabha. Tittering coquettishly, she covered herself again, but none too quickly. The look she favoured the Asuras with was full of promises – to all of them.

The Gods and Demons had sat down as they entered, all together. Now the enchantress insisted that they must sit apart, across the hall from one another. The bewitched Demons made no objection; they had agreed not to cross her will on any matter. Nectar in hand, she came among them first. She bent low before Bali, who sat in the front row of the half of the sabha where the Asuras sat. Again the silk slipped off her dark breasts and her eyes promised that soon not just the amrita but she too would be theirs.

She whispered huskily to them, 'Let the niggardly Devas drink first. I will save the most for the end and the last part is the thickest and most potent.'

Perhaps, some of the Demons might have objected. Lust and the natural reluctance to take issue with a woman kept them from saying a word. To a man, they all wanted her more than the ambrosia even, and they felt that they would indeed have her as long as they did not annoy her in any way. Besides, their king Bali sat silent, his eyes riveted. With many a backward glance at the Demons, the Mohini crossed the floor to where the Devas sat.

The seductress now gave the chalice of amrita to the Devas and, one by one, they drank from it. The Demons sat watching, waiting breathlessly for the nectar and the one who would bring it to them. However, there was one Asura called Swarbhanu who doubted the Mohini. With sorcery, he disguised himself as a Deva and crept into their ranks.

Swarbhanu, better known as Rahu, sat between Surya and Soma Deva, the Sun and the Moon. The Sun had just finished drinking the amrita and was handing the chalice to Soma, when Rahu took it from him and drank a mouthful. Surya and Soma cried out together that an Asura had drunk the nectar. In a flash, Mohini the enchantress vanished and Vishnu stood where she had been – for, it was he all along, the beguiler of the Asuras.

Quicker than thinking, he beheaded Rahu with the Sudarshana Chakra. The amrita had only reached the Demon's throat and Rahu's body fell dead. But his head was now immortal and the Blue God gave that Asura planethood, albeit invisible planethood. He set him up in the sky between the Sun and the Moon. Because it was those luminaries that betrayed him to Vishnu, Rahu attacks them with an eclipse whenever he can and for that time chokes them terribly, now the Sun and then the Moon.

Bali and his Asuras saw they had been deceived. Despite having laboured as hard as the Devas while churning the Kshirasagara, they did not get to drink a drop of amrita. The wise do say that what is written in the stars is inevitable, and only with bhakti can one find perfect equanimity in the face of fortune and adversity.

Most of all, he that works for selfish ends, devotes his time, his wealth, thought, speech and deeds for himself or those that are near to him, finally finds they have all been in vain. He is like one who waters the leaves and branches of a tree. He who works for the sake of God waters the roots of an eternal tree and finds his reward in this world and the next."

DEVASURA YUDDHA

"SO THE DEMONS, THE DAITYAS AND DANAVAS, WHO TOILED WITH NO devotion for God in their hearts, were left empty-handed at the end. Having secured the elixir of immortality for his bhaktas, the Devas, Vishnu mounted golden Garuda and vanished into the sky like an arrow of light.

The furious sons of Diti flew roaring at the Devas. The Devas took up arms and defended themselves. Upon that historic shore, they fought a pitched and bloody war: Kashyapa's sons all. With arrow and sword, with fulminant astras and every manner of deadly weapon they fought. Martial music blared forth – mridanga and dumaru, bugles, horns and enormous sea-conches. The roars of footsoldiers made the waves stand up in awe, as did the whinnying of war-horses, the trumpeting of elephants, in thousands.

Chariots ploughed through the sand at other chariots; elephants lumbered at other elephants, bearing tameless warriors upon their backs. Footsoldiers ran at other footsoldiers, the races of darkness against those of light. All sorts of extraordinary mounts of battle adorned that shore – camels, donkeys, bison, bears.

Some fighters rode lions and tigers; others flew upon the backs of vultures, herons, cranes and king falcons that are not found even in the deepest forests of this earth any more. Other strange and fabulous warriors came riding upon the backs of whales, on sarabhas, which are like rocs, upon huge buffaloes, on rhinocerii, oxes, gavayas and red arunas. There were goblins, homunculii and other soldiers, great and small, who came to battle on the backs of jackals, rats, chameleons, hares, on the backs of men, goats, krishnasaaras, swans, and on horseback.

The two forces faced each other, by land, by sea and air, many bizarre themselves, and others mounted on weird creatures that had no names in the tongues of men. Several rode on birds of land and water. The beach, which was that battlefield, shone with white parasols, banners and flags of various colours and shapes, great fans made of peacocks' feathers and chamaras: whisks with their handles encrusted with jewels that sparkled in the clear light.

Bright and dark robes and turban-ends fluttered in the sea wind; armour, weapons and ornaments shone in the radiant sun. The two armies were like two seas swarming with creatures of the deep.

Virochana's son, the magnificent Bali, rode in a vimana called the Vaihaayasa, which Mayaa Danava had made for him. That craft had every sort of weapon and astra inside it and it was so exotic and wonderful that there are no words to describe it adequately. It was like nothing you have seen or imagined, O Parikshit; it flew anywhere, obeying Bali's thought, his wish. At times you could see it; at others it was invisible. It shone like a full moon rising.

Mahabali's vimana was ringed by other, smaller, but also grand craft, in which his greatest commanders rode, each one a lord of his people. Namuchi was there, Sambara, Banasura, Viprachitti, Ayomukha, Dwimoordha, Kaalanabha, Praheti, Heti, Ilvala, Shakuni, Bhootasantaapa, Vajradamshtra, Virochana, Hayagreeva, Shankushiras, Kapila, Meghadundubhi, Tarakasura, Chakradrik, Sumbha, Nisumbha, Jambha, Ulkala, Arishta, Arishtanemi, Mayaa master of the Tripura, and the Nivatakavachas, Kaalakeyas and Paulomas. All these were Demons of incomparable power and stature, the most illustrious lords of their race – the firstborn race in creation.

They had been betrayed by the Devas and rage held them in its clasp. Across the field, Indra's thousand eyes blazed to see his enemy. He saw these Asuras like a pride of wild lions, roaring with warlust and blowing on a sea of conches that boomed together like the knell of the Apocalypse.

As the morning sun does on the shoulder of the Sunrise Mountain, lighting it up and the rivers that flow down its sides, Indra loomed over the sandy battlefield on four-tusked white Airavata of the line of the Diggajas, the Elephants of the four Quarters.

Around Indra were the Lokapalas, the guardians of the quarters and directions – Vayu, Agni, Varuna, Kubera and the others. Battle was first joined with volleys of scathing taunts and abuse, reminders of old follies and weaknesses, which pierced the enemy like lances of fire. Challenges to duel echoed above the waves. Enemies roared out individual enemies' names, inviting them to fight.

Then, like two seas breaking their shores the legions of darkness and light swept at each other. Indra stormed at Bali. Guha locked with Taraka, Varuna with Heti, Moitra with Praheti. Yama battled Kaalanabha; Viswakarman faced Mayaa. Tvashtar and Sambaraa hewed at each other, as did Savita and Virochana. Namchi's arrows flared at Aparaajita, the Aswins' astras at Vrishaparva. Surya the Sun's bow radiated shafts as his orb does rays of light; they were all aimed at Bali's hundred sons, the eldest among whom was the savage and noble Banasura.

Soma the Moon fought Rahu, Vayu Deva aimed his arrows at the sorceress Puloma, who was Sachi's mother but Indra's sworn enemy. The Devi Bhadrakali came to fight for the Devas and she hunted Sumbha and Nisumbha. Rudra battled the Demon Jambha; Agni and the Buffalo Demon Mahishasura fought. Brahma's sons, the Marichis, plunged at the Daitya brothers Ilvala and Vatapi.

Kamadeva and Durmarsha duelled ferociously, the seven mothers, the Saptamatris, and Ulkala, Sukra and Brihaspati, Shani and Narakasura, the Maruts and the Nivatakavachas, the eight Vasus and the Kaalakeyas, the Viswedevas and Sachi's brothers the Paulomas, and the lesser Rudras and the Krodhavasas.

Roars, shrieks, yells, howls, chatters, vile abuse, arrows, flashing blades, lances and javelins, arrows and fulgurant astras – all these filled the moist sea air. Heads were lopped off like flowers with diverse weapons – bhusundis, chakras, gadas, swords, wedge-tipped spears. Warriors were immolated with occult astras of fire, with explosive firebrands. They were truncated with trisulas, cloven with axes and scimitars, smashed with iron clubs wielded by trolls, with hammers and struck down with incredible volleys from bhindipalas, which are a kind of catapult.

The two majestic armies were quickly reduced. Dismembered corpses adorned the sands and the white waves that frothed ashore were tinted crimson. Trunkless limbs, limbless trunks, headless bodies, bodiless heads, the whole dead and the mutilated living – all these decked the shore of fate. The dead and dying lay everywhere, with the most eclectic assortment of weapons piercing them.

Clouds of dry sand and dust flew up palely into the air, but fell back stained scarlet with the copious blood that sprayed everywhere. Ornaments of every kind littered that beach: priceless bracelets and necklaces, upon arms and throats hewn off by brutal swordstrokes, rings with huge solitaires worn by hands severed at the wrist.

Crowns either struck off the regal heads that wore them and coronets that were still worn by heads that had lost their neck – with faces whose lips were bitten through in their last fierce anguished moment, whose eyes bulged and blazed horribly – these were scattered everywhere by Yama's ghastly, playful hands. Great arms, whose hands still clutched mighty swords or jewelled bows of unearthly craft, legs that were thick as elephants' trunks: chariot wheels trundled over these and living war elephants crushed them underfoot.

Here and there, warriors whose heads had been struck off still danced to the music of war, swinging their swords blindly for some moments, with blood spouting from their naked throats but still appearing to see with eyes that stared from fallen heads, before they seemed to realise that they had been killed and fell themselves onto soft welcoming sands.

Bali shot ten scorching shafts at Indra, three at the Deva's white elephant Airavata, four more at the warriors who guarded the elephant's sides and back, the mahout who rode on Airavata's neck with another – all in a wink. But in less than that time, Indra, laughing, cut down those fifteen shafts.

Bali seized up a heavy and sorcerous lance, which shone with many occult fires. But as he drew his arm back to cast it at Indra, the Deva shattered it with a volley like light from his superb bow. In frenzy, Mahabali cast an assortment of missiles at Aditi's son, his half-brother – a trident, another javelin, an iron tomara club and ten double-edged rishtis, which are swords made for throwing. Indra smashed them all to dust with fiery arrows from his elegant bow, like an arc of glass in his hands.

Bali now used the maya of the Asuras and vanished from sight. In a moment, an uncanny mountain materialised in the sky above the Deva legions. From this massif a deadly array of burning trees, and rocks and crags, and a hail of razor sharp stones rained down on the forces of light, pulverising, dissecting and immolating Charana and Gandharva, Kinnara and human.

A rain of serpents fell on the Deva army – giant pythons with jaws like canyons that devoured whole phalanxes; vipers and cobras that sprayed columns of footsoldiers with venom that consumed even their skeletons in a sizzle. Then prides of sabre-tooths, lions and tigers, bounded down on the hapless battalions of Devaloka and rent them limb from limb and drank their blood. There were massive boars that were invulnerable to every weapon and left furrows of gore in the wake of their lightning charges. These made a target of especially the Deva elephants.

Stranger scourges flew down on the Deva forces: naked kotavis, fanged rakshasi women carrying flaming trisulas, hundreds of them, some insanely enticing, others whose very sight could make strong men faint, they were so hideous. Behind them, came dreadful rakshasas in ruthless waves, roaring, 'Hack them to pieces!' 'Drink their blood!' And so they did.

Also from the suspended mountain fell great gashes of lightning, in livid storms, ashing thousands of Deva troops. Lashing rains followed, of firedrops and cinders. Bali blew sudden winds at these showers of flame and a small apocalypse raged there, threatening to consume the host of heaven entirely. Bali spun cyclones across the milkwhite waters of the Kshirasagara. Tidal waves, thousands of hands tall, rose up and swept ashore to drown the Devas and their warriors. The sea spun with whirlpools deep as death and swallowed the aquatic legions of Varuna Deva and the dolphins and whales upon whose backs they rode.

Indra and the Devas were numbed by the ferocity of the Demon's onslaught. They watched helplessly as their army melted before their eyes into death. Agni, Surya, Soma, Vayu, Kubera, the Aswins, none of these had any answer to the Asura's rage. Mahabali's commanders also cast their own potent sorcery over the hosts of light, multiplying the havoc that their Emperor wreaked. They were all awesome abhicharis and the Devas could not stand the myriad evils that enveloped them.

As is their wont when in dire straits, they meditated upon Vishnu, blue Saviour, protector of worlds. Instantly, they saw him appear, his feet as soft as green shoots of the first leaves of spring resting on Garuda's shoulders. He wore brilliant yellow silk; his eyes were like the petals of a freshly bloomed lotus. He was eight-armed now and carried a different cosmic ayudha in every hand. The Srivatsa curled on his chest shone and the Kaustubha beside it was deeply radiant. The kundalas in his ears were heavy and sparkled and the crown on his head defied describing.

Immediately as Vishnu appeared upon that shore where the Devas were being humiliated in battle by the Demons, the Asuras' sorcery melted away and vanished like phantoms in a dream do at waking. Truly is it said, O King, that remembering Vishnu dispels danger of every sort.

The Daitya Kaalanemi saw Hari and, whirling his trident round, cast it at the Blue God's golden mount. It flew at Garuda like a streak of lightning, but leaning forward, Vishnu caught it casually in his hand, before it struck the Golden Eagle. Blithely, he flung it back at the Demon, swifter than it had come and slew both the Asura and the fell creature he rode.

Next moment, he beheaded two sinister Danavas, Mali and Sumali, with the Sudarshana Chakra. Malyavan dashed up and swung his mace at Garuda's head. But Hari struck the Daitya's head off before he could complete the blow."

VICTORY

PRINCE AMONG RACONTEURS, THE UNEQUALLED SUKA, CONTINUED, "When Vishnu came to battle for them, the Devas recovered their strength and their courage, magically. Indra, Vayu and all the others found heart again and shot the enemy with inspired dazzles of arrows. The Gods were like wilted plants that were watered with marvellous grace and sprang erect.

Roaring again, in fury at the way Bali had shamed him earlier, Indra invoked his diamond Vajra, weapon among weapons. It shone in his hand like a sun and gasps and cries from the Demon army filled the air, where birds of carrion wheeled by now in thick swarms, eagerly awaiting the feast that must follow.

Bali flitted here and there, apparently nerveless, in his smooth disk of the air. Indra thundered at him, 'Did you think, O Fool, that you would conquer the Devas with your magic tricks? Did you think we are children that your little spells would vanquish us? You wanted to overrun Devaloka with your paltry maya. Pay the price now, Bali, I mean to cut your ugly head from your neck with my Vajra. Let all your races of the night save you from me if they can.'

The Lord of the Asuras, peerless Mahabali, replied calmly, 'Men make war because of their racial karma. Time brings them ineluctably to a field of fate, and not they themselves but only their karma decides who will live or die, taste victory or defeat. Besides, he that triumphs one day might well be struck down the next. Time is a wheel that turns slowly but inexorably, and neither victory nor defeat, sovereignty nor subjugation is permanent.

The wise see that not they themselves but Kaala is the moving force behind every event, each battle. The wise are never elated or dejected, come what may. Yet you, Indra, king of the Devas, seem not to know this eternal truth. So we hardly take your taunts or your abuse to heart, but only to be the prattling of a witless child. Those that are truly knowing can only pity you, Deva, for you rant like a fool.'

And unruffled, Bali raised his bow and shot a sizzle of arrows at his enemy. More than the arrows the truth that the Demon pierced him with was like a sharp goad to an elephant. Indra cast the Vajra of a thousand joints of thunder and lightning at the Asura. Bali and his vimana fell like a mountain of yore that had its wings sheared.

The Daitya Jambha, who rode a black lion, came bounding to his fallen king's side and saw to it that he was ministered to. Then Jambha rushed at Indra and struck him a huge blow with his mace; he struck Airavata under his milky throat. Screaming, the white tusker sank to his knees. He dripped blood where the Demon's blow had landed. He could not get up and Indra sat helpless upon his back.

In a flash, a wondrous chariot flitted down from the sky, a vimana with Matali for its sarathy. A thousand horses drew that chariot and Indra climbed into it. Even Jambha beamed to see that beautiful, awesome craft; at the same time, he flung a burning spear charged with a hundred spells at the divine charioteer. Matali cried out as needles of pain flared through his body and Indra struck Jambha's head from its neck in a scarlet blur with the Vajra.

Narada, of course, was there to witness the battle of battles on the shore of the sea of milk. It was he that brought word of Jambha's death to his kinsmen Namuchi, Bala and Paka. They rushed into battle against the Deva king and covered him first in a torrent of abuse, and then in a shower of dark arrows, even as a cloud does a mountain with rain.

Bala loosed an arrow that divided itself into a thousand arrows, and wounded all Indra's steeds. Paka struck Matali with a brace of searing shafts and struck large pieces off the Deva king's chariot with other arrows.

It is told that Paka's archery was supernatural; he made a moment into an hour, so many arrows did he shoot in an instant. His archery was believed by many that witnessed that battle to be the most spectacular feat of the entire encounter.

Namuchi was not quiet either. He shot fifteen golden barbs at Indra, even as he made the most extraordinary rumbling sound in his throat, which was no softer than the rumbling of a thunderhead before it releases its torrents. These Asuras and others, too, who came raging to avenge their fallen king, covered Indra and his chariot with an eclipse of arrows that hid the Deva's splendour even as black clouds obscure the sun.

When Indra's glory was veiled, the other Devas cried out like some company of merchants, their ship tossed upon the high seas by a squall. But truly like the sun from behind a screen of clouds, Indra emerged from the veil of arrows. Now his brilliance lit up earth, sea and sky, all the quarters; he was brighter than he had ever been.

He saw his army of grace beleaguered on every side, and again he invoked his Vajra, like an incomparable diamond, thunderbolt made from an ancient Rishi's bones of adamant. He beheaded Bala and Paka with it, so their heads flew out and landed amidst the white waves of the ocean near Mandara still floating some way from the shore. This struck fear into every demon heart.

But Namuchi's only reaction was of fury. In a froth, he roared at Indra, 'Die, Deva coward!' and cast a golden lance that shone like a small galaxy of varicoloured stars for all the precious stones that encrusted its shaft. It was a spear of the direst power and flew howling through the sky at the lord of Devas. But Indra, roused, bisected it along its length with an arrow like a silver streak.

Indra cast the irresistible Vajra at Namuchi, this time meaning to blow that Demon's head apart. The weapon that had never failed to claim its victim's life before, the weapon without compare among all the stars, save for Vishnu's Chakra and Siva's Trisula, glanced off the Asura's skin like the head of a flower! This was the Vajra that had killed Vritrasura in some

Kalpas, according to those that know. But Namuchi's throat was proof against it.

Indra was terror-stricken. He thought, 'Ah, inexorable is the power of prarabdha! It can only be because of karma that this Demon is proof against my Vajra. When I wanted to protect the dwellings of men, I once sheared the wings of the mountains of the earth with this ayudha. I killed Vritrasura, who was an incarnation of all Tvasthar's tapasya and a greater Asura than this Namuchi, with my Vajra. No other astra could even scratch Vritra's skin, but the Vajra cut his head from his throat.

This Namuchi is a paltry demon, yet he resists my adamantine thunderbolt made from the mighty Dadichi's bones. Ah, this weapon is just a twig and I will not use it ever again!'

As he despaired, the Deva heard an asariri, a disembodied voice. The voice said to him, 'This Demon has a boon that he cannot be slain by a solid weapon or by a fluid one. So, think how else you can kill him!'

Startled and perplexed, Indra meditated upon discovering something that was neither solid nor liquid. In a moment, his heart gave him an answer. He chanted a mantra and spun his finger round at the crest of a wave of the sea, making a deadly disk of foam. He cast this chakra with a deep humkara at Namuchi and struck the Asura's head from his neck in a crimson blast.

The Rishis of heaven showered down the finest, most fragrant petals of light over Indra. The Gandharva lords, Viswavasu and Paravasu, played on unearthly instruments and sang. Rambha's Apsaras danced in the sky and drums of the air beat up an exquisite storm.

Exhorted by Indra's triumph, Vayu, Agni and Varuna slew their antagonists on the shore of fate, easily as lions do deer. The Deva forces swept forward, immortal after they had drunk the amrita, and terrible. They let flow a river of demon blood on the white sands and among the white waves. It seemed they meant to wipe out the firstborn race of creation this day.

An alarmed Brahma sent Narada to stop the carnage. Narada appeared before the rampaging Devas and cried in a voice that stopped them in their tracks, 'By Vishnu's grace you have drunk the amrita. He has blessed you with everything anyone's heart can desire. Stop this murdering now or you will pay direly for it one day!'

What Narada said seemed to quench the Devas' bloodlust. They put up their weapons and, climbing into their vimanas, flew back to Devaloka. They left the beach of moment, where they had regained their immortality by drinking the nectar, a savage spectacle – a sludge of dead Demons and their dark blood, slowly seeping into the sands, and being washed away already by the incessant ebb and flow of the waves. The tide carried severed heads and limbs and whole but lifeless corpses, too, out to sea, where they bloated and floated awhile before sinking or being devoured by carnivores of the deep.

When the Devas had left, the Asuras left alive, shattered but brave as ever, sought Narada's leave to take their sovereign Bali to the Sunset Mountain, which is sacred to their race. Virochana's son, Mahabali, who had ruled the three worlds, hung precariously between life and death.

Now the Asuraguru Sukracharya came among his wounded and dead. He was a master of the mritasanjivini vidya. With just a touch of his hands, he healed the injured and even revived the dead who had not been decapitated. And upon the mountain behind which the sun sets, he treated great Bali with secret mantras and herbs of healing and gradually nursed the Asura emperor back to health.

And the Sage Bali, knower of the fleeting nature of fortune and misfortune in this mortal world, did not grieve that he had lost his power, at least for the time being. Unlike the rest of his people, he was hardly even disappointed that he and his race had been cheated out of having a share of the amrita."

MOHINI

SUKA SAID, "NOW SIVA HEARD HOW VISHNU HAD BECOME AN enchantress to help the Devas drink the amrita. Mounting Nandiswara, he arrived with Uma and his ganas in Vaikuntha. Vishnu welcomed Siva and Parvati with honour and affection and made them sit in a splendid throne beside his own.

With a smile, Siva sang a spontaneous hymn to the Blue God, which welled in his heart as a wave of light. '*Devadava Jagatvyaapin Jagadeesha Jaganmaya; Sarveshamapi Bhavanam Tvamatma Heturishwara.*

Lord of Gods, pervasive One, Lord of worlds, who are the world embodied; You are the source of all beings, their soul and their master. You are the beginning the middle and the end of the universe; You are He who are beyond change, eternal One. You are He that experiences and is the experience as well. You are the Brahman, the Truth, Primal Consciousness.

Rishis that want nothing but moksha abandon every attachment and live meditating upon your holy feet. You are the complete One. You are birthless, deathless, immaculate and spiritual. You are beyond sorrow, immutable, blissful. You are everything that exists, yet You transcend it all. You are the Atman of the created, the Lord, and they all depend upon You.

There is no other like You. You are like gold from which numberless ornaments are fashioned – all from the same substance. You remain yourself as essence and manifestations, and only the ignorant speak of any difference between the two. Vedantins, the Advaitins, describe You as the Brahman. The Mimamsakas call You Sanatana Dharma. The Samkhyas say You are the Being beyond Prakriti and Purusha. The Pancharaatrins name you Purushottama, He who owns the Nine Sacred Powers. The Yogins call You, simply, Purusha, who are infinite and infinitely free, who depend only upon yourself to exist.

Not I or Brahma, not the sattva-conceived Munis like Marichi, all of us deluded by your maya, can fathom even your universe entirely, let alone your primordial Being. Surely, the Asuras and humans do not begin to understand You. Only You are your own knower, Hari – You who are pure and pristine Intelligence, who pervade all things, all worlds, as air does space.'

Siva paused, then continued, almost musingly, 'Vishnu, I have seen all your Avataras, whenever You incarnated yourself out of love for your bhaktas, to save them from some great evil or other, from age to age. But never have You come before as a woman. I must see the Mohini who enchanted the Asuras and helped the Devas drink the amrita. I have an irresistible desire to see the Seductress You became. I have come here to see her.'

Such a plumbless smile Vishnu favoured Parameshwara, the trident-bearer, with. He said in his perfectly beautiful voice, 'Then you shall see her, my Lord Mahadeva, greatest of Gods: she who excited the demons so much that they lost their wits and parted with what was as precious to them as their very lives.'

Suddenly, Vishnu disappeared. Siva waited a while and was about to leave, disappointed, when he found himself standing in a charmed garden, such as he had never seen, with Uma at his side, Nandin and some of the ganas as well. How he came here from the sabha of Vaikuntha he did not know, but here he was, great Siva, in a breathtaking little wood whose peerless trees hung heavy with iridescent blooms in every colour of the rainbow and many beyond, softly vibrating hues. Their branches also bore tender pink shoots.

Next moment, Siva and Parvati saw her under those indescribable trees, playing with a magical ball – she that had bewitched the Asuras of Bali, she the Enchantress: the Mohini. She was as noble as she was beautiful, now a thousand times more so than she had been when she deceived Bali and his demons. She wore rich silk and a golden girdle round her waist. Her perfect legs were like tender shoots of spring themselves, as she chased the ball, which surely bounced away from her with a will of its own, with some bewitchment.

So slim was her waist, and so full her breasts that whenever she stooped to grasp at the ball, when it lay teasingly still for a moment, it seemed her body might break in two! Across the outthrust, throbbing breasts she wore a string of pearls, each one a treasure like a full moon in miniature.

Her eyes were long and shining, her pupils dilated with the enchantment of chasing the uncanny ball, which at times flew through the air and the branches of the trees. Thick bluish curls framed her dark face. Her skin was like satin, smoother, and her earrings hung brilliantly from her long lobes.

Then a sudden gust of breeze arose there and for a maddening moment parted, loosened the silken garment she wore, so her breasts, her body, her sex were plainly visible. That sight, O King, was enough to make the world go blind with lust. At just that moment, the Mohini gave him the most wanton glance and such an inviting smile, and the Lord Siva was not immune to her charms!

Siva forgot himself; he forgot his ganas around him. He forgot Nandiswara, their lord; why, Rudra forgot that Uma, his eternal love, his sacred wife, the Goddess herself, stood at his side. Then that timely and local breeze quickly turned into a short breath of wild wind, snatched Mohini's silk cloth away from her dark body and carried it away. Her golden girdle fell round her ankles, too. Siva stood thunderstruck, his gaze riveted to her nakedness. She gazed back at him, sidelong, but as raptly.

With a moan, Siva abandoned all shame, all restraint, and he ran headlong towards the dark seductress. He did not care that Uma watched; he cared for nothing anymore save to possess the blue Mohini at once. As for her, she gave the most alluring giggle to see him come, and flitted away under the trees behind her.

Rudra chased her, aroused beyond tolerance. From tree to tree she ran, teasing him, yet beckoning surely, promising him all that he wanted. Panting, growling with lust, he followed her quite helplessly. He had lost all control and rumbled after her as a bull elephant in musth does his cow.

Then the pursuit ended suddenly behind a silvery tree full of titters and whispers. Siva seized her long hair, drew her roughly to him, bared himself and entered her like lightning. His groan echoed there, and her scream. He thrust at her madly, like the fire of stars. All at once, with strength more than he would have credited her with, she pushed him away again and ran from him once more.

Siva ran after her, his manhood erect and throbbing, howling that she had escaped him. She crossed the worlds, and as he chased after her, the wind and his tumultuous excitement unmanned the mighty Rudra and his seed spurted from him in steaming geysers. These became the gold and silver mines of the earth. She ran on, swift as time, with him after her.

She flitted through the sacred asramas of the Rishis of the world and he went after her without sense or shame – on the soft banks of rivers, round great and lucid lakes, over mountains and through dense green forests. It would seem the two of them wanted to demonstrate the power and humiliation of succumbing to lust: to show how even the greatest God, Siva himself, was helpless in its clasp. It appeared they wanted to warn the holy hermits, the seekers after the truth, away from this most powerful enemy.

So Vishnu the Mohini ran and Rudra flew after her, with his seed ejaculating from his tumid linga, everywhere. Then, all his seed was spilt and Siva stopped in his tracks. Now he knew that Vishnu's ineluctable maya had deluded him. The Mohini who had run before him also vanished and Mahavishnu stood before Rudra in her place.

After a moment, Siva threw back his head and began to laugh, in ringing peals. Vishnu laughed with him. They embraced each other and laughed. Vishnu said, 'Ah Mahadeva, surely You are the greatest God! For who else is so free from desire and attachment that he can laugh at my maya, and be free of it in a wink? You are the only one whom my cosmic delusion shall never have power over.'

It seemed that Vishnu, smilingly, blessed Siva thus. But Parikshit, there was another outcome of their encounter. For when Siva first ravished the Mohini for a few moments, some of his seed was spilt into her body and

Vishnu became pregnant by that fierce hiranyaretas, Rudra's golden, flaming semen.

Now that he was a God again and no longer an enchantress, their child, born at once, miraculously, came forth from Vishnu's blue thigh. And he would be called Ayyappa – HariHaraputra, the son of Vishnu and Siva, a great God himself and a protector of his bhaktas. He would ride a tiger and be the celibate and bachelor God of the sacred Mountain Sabarimala.

Vishnu and Siva bowed low to each other, after their unearthly and fabulous union. Then Vishnu returned to Vaikuntha and Siva to Kailasa. They left their powerful child to grow in the wilderness, for who in heaven or on earth could harm the son of Siva and Vishnu?

Back upon the most sacred mountain in the three worlds, the Rishis hymned the Lord Rudra and the birth of his son by the Mohini, Vishnu himself!

Siva said to Uma, 'I have never been snared by any maya, dark or bright, before. Yet the Mohini was irresistible. Vishnu bound me in his power. I sat in samadhi for a thousand years once, and when I emerged from my absorption in the Brahman, you asked me upon whom I had fixed my mind. It was on Vishnu that I meditated, Uma. He is beyond time and no amount of Vedic ritual can take one to him.

But thinking of him with love can. He always answers the call of bhakti, and beyond the bhakta's every expectation. You saw what happened today. Why, He and I have a child together now!'

Parikshit, this is the legend of how the amrita was churned from the Kshirasagara by the Devas and the Asuras together. This is the tale of how Vishnu helped them churn and finally, because it was an age of sattva, the Blue One enabled only the gods of light and not the demons of darkness to drink the ambrosia of immortality.

As with every other legend of the Blue God, O King, this one also tells that bhakti, worship and love, are the only ways to him: those and a humble heart. For, never through cosmic time has a prayer, the very whisper of a prayer, gone unanswered, what then to speak of the profound dhyana of the Rishis of the earth and the incomparable tapasya and samadhi of Siva, Mahayogin?" Sri Suka said.

He added gravely, sadly, "But the evil-minded and the cruel never find the Lord Vishnu, O Pandava, not until they have been purified with torture, not until they have paid for their sins against their fellow beings and creatures. So let no one forget that the path of evil is a ruinous one, a dangerous way to tread. Every sin leads you farther away from bhakti, for you sin against your own heart, your own self; you injure not those that you seek to harm but only yourself."

THE LAST SEVEN MANVANTARAS

SUKA SAID, "LET ME NOW TELL YOU ABOUT THE CHILDREN OF THE present Manu, who is called Sraddhadeva. He is the seventh Manu and he is Surya Deva's son. Since the Sun God is also known as Vivaswan, this Manu is also called Vivaswata Manu.

Kshatriya, Vaivaswata Manu has ten sons – Ikshvaku, Nabhaga, Dhrishta, Saryati, Narishyanta, Naabhaaga, Dishta, Karusha, Prishadhra and Vasumaan. The Devas during his Manvantara are the Adityas, the Vasus, the Rudras, the Viswedevas, the Maruts, the Aswini Kumaras and the Ribhus. Their king is Purandara, the Lord Indra.

The Saptarishis of this Manvantara are Kashyapa, Atri, Vasishta, Viswamitra, Gautama, Jamadagni and Bharadwaja. The Lord comes in his Vamana Avatara, as the son of Kashyapa and Aditi, indeed, as the youngest of the Adityas.

These, O Parikshit, are the seven Manvantaras that have already been. Listen now to some descriptions of those that are yet to come. Listen to the Avataras of the Blue God in those epochs.

Vivaswan, the Sun, had two wives; both were Viswakarman's daughters and their names were Samjna and Chaya. There are those that hold he had a third wife, Badava, though some Sages insist that Badava was only another name by which Samjna was known.

Vivaswan had three sons out of Samjna. They were Yama, Yami and Sraddhadeva. By Chaya he had a son called Savarni, a daughter called Tapati – who was married to Samvarana – and another son, Shanaischara.

It is told that the Aswini Kumaras are Surya Deva's sons by his third wife Badava.

Pandava, when this present Manvantara ends and the time comes for the eighth one to begin, Chaya's son Savarni will be the ruling Manu," Suka, who could see through the ages, said.

He continued calmly, "Savarni will have many sons, prominent among them Nirmoka and Virajaska. The Devas of his Manvantara will be Sutapasa, Viraja and Amritaprabha. Virochana's son Bali, the Asura, shall be the Indra of the epoch, for in this seventh Manvantara the same Mahabali gave up all the earth with no hesitation and with absolute delight to Vishnu, who came to Bali's yagna as Vamana the Dwarf, and asked him for just three strides of earth. The Blue One shall make Bali Indra of Savarni's Manvantara as a reward for his devotion.

When the peerless Mahabali has ruled heaven for the entire Manvantara, he shall attain union with Hari forever. In fact, at first, after traversing all of heaven and all the earth with his first two strides of land that Bali happily granted him, Vishnu thrust Mahabali down into the earth by setting his third stride on the noble Demon's head.

But then, Bali was such a righteous Asura, such a great ruler of his people, that Hari made him sovereign of the Under-world Sutala, which is a domain of more grace and splendour than Devaloka. Even today, Virachana's son rules that realm even as Indra does his heaven. And he has as much glory and power, as much honour as the master of Devaloka.

When the eighth Manvantara dawns, the Saptarishis shall be Galava, Deeptiman, Parasurama, Aswatthama, Kripa, Rishyasringa the innocent, and my own father Vyasa. All these sit in fathomless tapasya even now in their various asramas.

Vishnu incarnates himself as Sarvabhauma in the eighth Manvantara. He will be born as the son of Devaguhya and Saraswati. When he comes he seizes dominion over Devaloka from Purandara, the Indra, and makes a gift of heaven to Bali, the Asura.

Come the ninth Manvantara, and Varuna Deva's son Dakshasavarni becomes the Manu. Among his many sons Bhutaketu and Diptaketu are best known. Among the Devas of this epoch are Paara and Marichigarbha. Adbhuta, the amazing, shall be their Indra. Dyutiman shall be the main Sage among the Saptarishis.

In the ninth Manvantara, Vishnu's Avatara is Ayushmaan and Ambudhara's son Rishabha. It is with his blessing that Adbhuta, his bhakta, becomes Indra and rules the three worlds.

Brahmasavarni, the great, Upasloka's son, shall become Manu of the tenth Manvantara. Bhurishena and his brothers shall be his sons. The Saptarishi shall be Havishmaan, Sukriti, Satya, Jaya, Murti and their three fellow Sages whose names are obscure, hidden.

Among the Devas of this epoch Suvasana and Viruddha shall be prominent, and Sambhu shall be their king, the Indra. Vishnu is born as Viswaksena, son of Visvasrik and his wife Vushuchi. He supports Sambhu during the Manvantara.

Dharmasavarni of incalculable intellect and mental powers, will be the eleventh Manu. He shall have ten sons, the eldest of whom will be Satyadharma. The Devas shall be the Vihangamas, the Kaamagamas and the Nirvanaruchayas. Vaidhrita shall be Indra and chief among the Charunas, the Saptarishis.

The Blue One incarnates himself as Dharmasetu, the son of Aryaka and his wife Vaidhrita; he protects swarga, bhumi and patala.

Rudrasavarni shall be the twelfth Manu. Of his ten sons, the first three shall be called Devavaan, Upadeva and Deva Shreshtha. Ritadhaama will be Indra in this Manvantara; Harita and his companions the Devas; Tapomurti, Tapasvi, Agnidhraka shall be three of the Saptarishis.

Vishnu's amsavatara in this epoch will be the son of Satyasahas and his wife Sunrita and He will be known as Svadhaama, and be a saviour to the three realms during this time.

Devasavarni is to be the thirteenth Manu, and his sons shall be Chitrasena, Vichitra and their brothers. Sukarma, Sutaama and their ilk shall be the Devas of this Manvantara and Divaspati shall be their lord, their Indra. Prominent among the Saptarishis of this aeon shall be the names of Nirmoka and Tattvadarsha. The Blue God will incarnate himself in amsa as Yogeshwara; he shall be the son of Devahotra and Brihati, and with his blessing shall Divaspati rule the three worlds.

The fourteenth Manu will be called Indrasavarni. Urugambhira and Buddhi shall be his most famed sons. Renowned among the Devas of this Manvantara shall be Chakshushas, from whom the power of chakshushi flows, which is the sight that sees through the veil of time. Suchi will be Indra in this time, and Agni, Baahu, Suchi, Suddha and Magadha the best known among the Saptarishis.

Vishnu incarnates himself as Brihadbhanu in this Manvantara. He is the son of Satrayana and Vitaana, and he propagates the cult of yagna, ritual sacrifice, during this epoch.

These, O Parikshit are the fourteen Manvantaras, seven that have been and the seven yet to come. Together they comprise a thousand chaturyugas, which are one Kalpa, which is a single day in the life of Brahma Pitamaha, the Lotus-born Creator," said the blithe Sri Suka to the wonderstruck Pandava emperor.

THE MANVANTARA

PARIKSHIT ASKED, "SUKA DEVA, WHAT WAS THE DHARMA OF THESE Manus during their Manvantaras?"

"The Manus, their sons, the Devas and Indras, the Saptarishis, all have their own dharma, their own place in the scheme of time in every Manvantara. The Blue God, who is before and after them all, assigns these tasks. But the main dharma of the Manu is to maintain order on earth, heaven and in the under-worlds, with the grace and the blessing of the Lord's Avataras, in each Manvantara.

For the world, every cycle of chaturyugas is crucial and spins the earth round from light to darkness. By the end of each chaturyuga, the Vedas have been lost in the evil that envelops the worlds. The Saptarishis unearth the sacred scripture with tapasya, and another satya yuga begins.

Once the Veda is revived, the mission of the Manu is to restore it to the world and to make the Sanatana Dharma stand again upon all its four feet, and to range as light and righteousness throughout creation. The Manu's sons set their shoulders to this task, as well, as do the Devas, receiving worship and their share of the havis, the burnt offerings from yagnas.

Indra enjoys power over heaven and earth, and sends down the timely and holy rains: parjannyam. Throughout the ages of every Manvantara, the Blue God takes birth as various Avataras and brings the eternal wisdom to men. He also comes as great yogis, showing the way to illumination, to moksha.

As Prajeshwara, Mahavishnu created the universe, as Indra he killed the Dasyus, and as Time, Kaala, He brings all things to an end.

All the Shastras give praise to the Lord, but the minds of men are so darkened by maya that they cannot perceive him directly, but only believe in his existence and worship him.

A Mahakalpa lasts two Paraadharas – this is how long each Brahma lives. Every Mahakalpa has a thousand years of Kalpas, each one a day of Brahma's. Each of these Kalpas contains fourteen Manvantaras, every one ruled by a Manu."

THE ASCENT OF MAHABALI

PARIKSHIT WANTED TO KNOW, "WHY DID THE LORD VISHNU COME like a beggar to Bali, asking for three strides of earth? And when Bali had given Vishnu what He wanted, why did he punish that just Asura? Why did he bind that righteous king in fetters?"

Suka Deva began, "Once Indra killed Mahabali, after the amrita had been churned up from the sea of milk. But the Demon's Guru Sukra Bhargava and his other preceptors called the Bhrigus, who knew the arcane art of reviving the dead, the ancient art called Mritasanjivini, brought Bali back to life upon the Sunrise Mountain.

Then on, Bali served these masters of his with greater devotion than ever. The Bhrigus, whose leader was the incomparable Sukra Deva, were pleased with the Asura's sincerity and his tremendous generosity. Bali told them of his single ambition – to conquer Devaloka, the realm of Indra and his Devas, who had deceived, betrayed and shamed the Asuras on the shore of the Kshirasagara.

His gurus gave the Demon the solemn consecratory ablution and made him perform the mahayagna that is called Viswajit, the one to subdue the universe. It was the yagna during which the sacrificer must make an offering of all that he owned.

Bali sat glowing before the yagna kunda, the pit in which the sacrificial fire danced. From the lofty, many-coloured flames issued a marvellous chariot, an unearthly ratha, worked with gold and startling jewels. It was yoked to horses that matched Indra's own and its flagstaff flew the banner of a golden lion.

From that fire there arose a magical quiver, inexhaustible, and a kavacha, armour light as the wind, impenetrable as rock. His grandfather, the immortal Prahlada, gave Bali a garland of unfading lotuses, a garland of protection, and the Rishi Sukra, the Asuraguru, gave him a great conch whose sound would freeze his enemies' blood, numb their limbs with fear.

Humbly, reverently, Mahabali received these gifts. He walked in pradakshina around the Rishis, his masters and Prahlada. He prostrated himself at their feet and they blessed him. Bali shone like the ahavaniyagni, the fire of the vedi that is kindled in a home.

He climbed into the golden chariot fetched from across the threshold of worlds for him, by Rishi Sukra of the line of Bhrigu. Around him were his bow and quiver, sword and armour, and he wore the most resplendent ornaments and draped his grandsire Prahlada's garland round his neck. Priceless ear-studs and bracelets sparkled like suns upon him.

Virochana's son shone like Surya Deva, at the head of his Asura legions: an army such as the worlds had seldom seen, a dark and great army. He blew on his conch and they marched towards Devaloka, their single purpose to avenge themselves on Indra and his people, to crush the Gods of light in battle and to rule the three worlds.

The earth trembled at their tread, at the stamp of Bali's elephant legions, the waves of his horses' hooves, the trundle of his greatest Demons' chariot wheels. Bhumi quaked and Patala below, Swarga did too. Bali's Asura chieftains were every bit as magnificent as he was. They were savage and fierce and so dauntless that they seemed ready to swallow the sky, to burn the quarters to ashes with their very gazes.

Indra's loka, his heaven, was so beautiful that it made beauty herself seem pale! Indescribable are the gardens of Devaloka. Indescribable is the Nandana, rich with unearthly trees of every hue, bloom and fruit, of every shape and size. Birds of exotic plumage roosted in their branches, and their songs were nothing less than divine, sweeter than the sweetest songs of the birds of earth; bees buzzed as if to provide the sruti for these songs, and their drone was surely drunk on the honey of Devloka.

It was always spring in these gardens; lakes shimmered on their sprawling expanses – lakes so clear and blue that there are truly no words for their beauty, though perhaps once in time there were, and still might be, hidden lakes on our earth that compared with these.

Upon these lakes floated lotuses that were so pure and perfect that none like them can grow in the mortal world; but again, perhaps they did, once, in the yugas of truth and grace, before the sins of men darkened the earth's very face. Also upon these lakes swam and glided a wealth of water birds as wonderful as everything else was about the enchanted realm of the Gods.

Swan, crane, chakravaka and karandava glided across these waters and came near to play in joy and to be stroked and fed by the Apsaras, who also came to bathe naked in these waters, the nymphs of heaven who were Devaloka's most exquisite feature, the irresistible Apsaras who often came with Deva or Gandharva lovers to sport in these gardens and to make love.

In the heart of the Nandana stood Indra's city: Amravati, immortal city. The celestial artisan Viswakarman had built Amravati; he created it with his supernatural vision and powers, with which Brahma the Creator had blessed him.

The Ganga, Himalaya's daughter, the blessed river that flows in heaven as Aakasaganga, as she does upon the earth, encircled Amravati even as a moat. High walls surrounded that city: walls that seemed to be made of fire, so bright were they.

What to say of the mansions and palaces of Indra's city? Their doors were wrought from gold. Their walls were embedded with diamonds, great solitaires and panels of smaller stones. They had balconies made entirely of coral.

What to tell of the towers of crystal in the capital of Devaloka that served as lookout posts? The highways were wide as great rivers and as clean. Countless were the sabhas of Amravati, where the Gods met; charmed were its courtyards.

Everywhere, young women of great beauty, upon whom age laid no finger, roamed like rays of light, like flames of loveliness and attraction. They wore heavenly raiment, which, like themselves, never faded.

In Indra's city, it is told that Vayu, the Wind God, is present everywhere, moving as the most fragrant and delicate breeze. It is he that welcomes visitors to the deathless city, with his ubiquitous and loving caress. His airs are scented with the saugandhika blossoms that fall from the tresses of the Apsaras.

The smoke of the incense of worship flows out from the gold- and silver-framed windows, adding its redolence to Vayu's breath. Strings of pearls adorned the arches and gateways of Amravati, in wild incredible profusion. Banners of the Gods, in countless vivid colours, flapped lazily in that breath upon their flagstaffs, also inlaid with gold and studded with invaluable gemstones.

The cries of peacocks, the cooing of doves, the humming of honeybees: these mingled with the soft songs and the musical instruments that the Apsaras played in their apartments of enchantment, in splendid and capacious mansions. Frequently, orchestras of Gandharva musicians played with the Apsara singers, whilst other celestial nymphs danced in troupes to the music.

Great and sharp and complex percussion instruments boomed and chattered, the fingers of the Gandharva minstrels who played upon them either slow and solemn, or swift as the wings of humming birds that hung over luscious flower-banks, and drew up their honey with tubular beaks, even as the city of Amravati did the music of the elves and nymphs.

Conches boomed, mridangas echoed, cymbals clashed, and over them the most inspired, unbelievable strains of veena, muraja, rishti and flute. O Parikshit, I cannot adequately describe the wonders of Amravati or Devaloka; but this I do say that no sinner can aspire to the realm of ceaseless wonders, no soul who is cruel, conceited, licentious or greedy.

But now, Virochana's son, the great Asura Mahabali, arrived with his army in Indra's heaven, and at the gates of the eternal city of Amravati, raised his sankha, his round sea-conch given him by his master, his Acharya Sukra Deva, and blew such a blast upon it that instantly the songs of the Gandharvas and Apsaras within the great city-walls were silenced. Those women, their skin soft as water, trembled.

The ground trembled beneath Amravati. A startled Indra called his Guru Brihaspati into his crystal court. All the other elemental Gods were there – Surya, Agni, Vayu, the Aswini Kumaras, Varuna, Yama, Kubera and the rest. They gazed out of their windows and saw Bali's legions stretching away as far as the horizon, past the horizon, a dark and terrible swarm, whose savage cries now shook the sky above Devaloka.

His voice quivering, in memory of an old rout at Mahabali's hands, Indra whispered to his master, 'Guru, he has returned, and look at him now! He is more powerful than he was when he first came and vanquished us. Oh, look how his body glows, like some malefic star.

Look at his eyes, burning like two red suns. Virochana's dreadful son looks as if he will swallow the earth, lick up the four quarters and burn up the three worlds with his gaze! He is as apocalyptic as the fire that Samkarshana spews from his thousand heads when the Pralaya begins.

But how has he become so powerful again? What is his secret? From whence comes this might that emboldens Mahabali to come to the gates of Amravati again and challenge us with this fearsome blast on a conch, whose like I have never heard before?'

Brihaspati said softly, 'The Bhrigus, especially Bali's Acharya Sukra Deva and his sishyas, have infused the Asura with their own Brahmic powers. You will not stand before the Demon, Indra, anymore than mortal men do before Yama when their time comes.

Only Vishnu can stand against Bali as he is now. My counsel to you is – *abandon Amravati and Devaloka, Indra, flee!* Resign yourself to living in exile, until the wheel of time turns and your fortune ascends once more. Go into hiding, until the Asura's time of misfortune overtakes him, as it does all the living, inexorably, and the stars portend his ruin.

This is the time when, by the blessings and prayers of Bhrigu's sons who support him, his power is at its zenith; no one can stand before Bali now. But the wheel of fortune turns, O Indra, and not men, the Gods or Demons can arrest its sure grind. Night always follows the day. And one day, Bali will find the curse of these same holy ones, the Rishis that are the font of his strength today, and then he will perish. All those that follow him shall be scattered like mown blades of grass in a gale.'

After their conclave with their Guru of unrivalled wisdom, and his advice to them, Indra and his Devas melted out of Amravati, vanished away along subtle, unseen paths of light that connect the universe. In many guises and forms they went, as birds and beasts, unrecognised, to myriad worlds.

When he heard that the Devas had fled, Virochana's awesome son entered Amravati and took possession of the capital of Devaloka, realm of the Gods and the sky. From Indra's ruby throne in the Sudharma a great Asura now held sway over Swarga, Bhumi and Patala. He appointed his foremost Demon Commanders to rule over the worlds as Surya, Agni, Vayu, Kama, Yama, Soma, Varuna and the other elemental Gods once had. The very nature of time changed.

Sukra Bhargava, who loved Bali as his own son, Sukra Deva by whose blessings Bali had arrived at this pinnacle of power, made his disciple perform a hundred Aswamedha yagnas so his sovereignty over the worlds would be secure and enduring. When he had undertaken these horse sacrifices, solemn and majestic, when no ruler of heaven, earth or the under-worlds dared arrest the careen of Mahabali's snow-white steeds, but came to Amravati bringing rich tribute to acknowledge the Demon's overlordship, Bali shone as the Moon does over the earth.

His cup of power and joy was full, and he sipped of it with deep delight. Bali ruled the worlds as sagely, why more so, than Indra even, and there was harmony below as there was above. The wise Asura never forgot the true root of his success and opulence – his Guru's blessing, the grace of all the Rishis that he worshipped and served still, like the commonest acolyte."

KASHYAPA TEACHES ADITI THE PAYOVRATA

SUKA SAID, "WHEN INDRA AND HIS BROTHERS FLED AMRAVATI, THEIR mother Aditi was stricken with grief at being separated from her sons. One day, after he had spent a millennium in the heart of a secret forest, plunged in a trance of samadhi, Kashyapa returned to everyday consciousness.

When he made his way back to his asrama, he found his wife Aditi and all his disciples in some misery. No smiles greeted his homecoming, but only a general gloom. He was duly worshipped, his feet were washed and he was offered the customary mahdurparka.

When he sat comfortably in a darbhasana, a throne of darbha grass, he turned to Aditi. 'You seem so full of grief. Has dharma been afflicted in the worlds? Have the Rishis been tormented by anyone? Surely, death always stalks the creatures of the earth, but I hope righteousness survives and grace is upon all the living.'

He paused and saw her still downcast. Kashyapa Muni continued, 'You are the lady of my home, the mistress of my hermitage. It is the Rishi's home, his asrama, which confers fortune and the fruit of yoga even to those that do not follow the path of yoga. Are the paths of dharma, artha and kama blighted in any manner?'

A frown creased his mighty brow briefly, 'Have you perhaps sent a guest away from our home, unfed or unwelcomed? Surely, the home from which a guest is turned away without being offered at least water is just a foxhole, no more.

Or, my Aditi, did you ever forget to feed the sacred fire with offerings when I was away? Perhaps you were disturbed by my absence? Possibly you were busy on a particular day, or distraught? My love, the visiting Rishi and the sacred fire are two faces of the Lord Vishnu, who manifests himself as all the Devas. The grihastha must worship these two before everything else.

But ah, beloved Aditi, some great sorrow sits upon your heart like a stone and fills your mind with darkness and your eyes with tears. Tell me what it is, for I know how brave you are and nothing trivial could make you grieve like this.'

His wife replied, 'My lord, all the Rishis are well, and dharma is strong throughout the land. Our asrama and every home serve the three purusharthas of dharma, artha and kama. In your name of renown, every guest that comes to our hermitage is welcomed and feted. The Rishis that visit us are welcomed like God Himself.

The agni never burns low in our agnikunda, and every day we have fed the sacred fire with oblations and offerings. Those who serve us are looked after like our own children – your disciples and the rest. O Kashyapa, how can you say that I am unhappy when you are always with me in my heart to lead me along the path of dharma?

Mighty son of Marichi, all the creatures, ruled by sattva, rajas and tamas, are your children, born from your mind or your body. You are equal minded in your affection for these creatures, and to those of darkness: the Demons, the Asuras. And by your tapasya your power is incalculable. Yet, you must favour those of the created that worship you, who revere you specially.'

Now tears flowed freely down her gracious face. 'O my husband, am I not among these, who serve you most specially, who worship you above everything else? Must you not look upon me with particular favour? You were lost in samadhi, I know, and you have not heard that my children the Devas, Indra and his brothers, have been cast out from Devaloka and go like beggars, in shameful disguise, through the worlds, hiding themselves in secret caves, for fear of Bali's Demons who hunt them.

My sons and I have had our position and wealth snatched from us. Virochana's son rules Swarga, Bhumi and Patala and, my lord, I am plunged in grief. You must save me and my sons, Kashyapa Mahamuni; to whom else can we turn for sanctuary?'

The faintest smile played on Kashyapa's lips. He said gently, 'Dear Aditi, these bonds of filial attachments are nothing but Hari's maya. The Atman has no sons or husbands, no wives or daughters! Yet though the Atman dwells in all of us, and of the Atman alone we are made, we are all bound by attachment and delusion.

I say to you, O wife, seek sanctuary not in me but in Mahavishnu, for he alone can undo the shackles of attachment. He pervades creation equally, without favour; he is the same in your son and your son's enemy. He is the sea of grace, of all majesties and wonders, the sea into which all of us finally flow to be subsumed in his infinite mercy and bliss.

I tell you, Aditi, he is ubiquitous and forever approachable, save that we do not try to approach him, preferring to be embroiled in his maya instead. Be that as it may, whatever your need, whatever your heart's desire, worship Narayana and he will give you what you want. He is Dinabandhu, Lord of the afflicted. He blesses munificently, and wisely, as well: so the soul is not ruined by his blessings. That is not true of the lesser Gods or their worship.'

Aditi asked, 'How shall I worship the Lord of the universe? Oh, tell me the quickest way by which I can approach him with prayer, so he will deliver my sons and me from our sorrow.'

Kashyapa replied musingly, 'Long ago, when I was told to go forth and become a creator, I asked the Lord Brahma the same question. It was the four-headed Pitama who instructed me in the method of best worshipping Vishnu. Listen.

You must keep a fast called the Payovrata, drinking just milk for twelve days on the bright fortnight of the month of Phalguna, with your heart fixed on Mahavishnu.

On the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight, the day before you begin the vrata, you should find some earth turned up by the hooves of a wild boar and smear your body with it, head to toe. Then bathe in a river chanting this mantra:

"Tvam Devayadivarohana rasaayaah sthaanamichchata;
udhritaasi namastubhyam paapmaanam mey pranaashaya.

I salute you, O Mother Earth, Goddess, whom the Varaha raised up from rasatala, to become a permanent home for all the living! O Bhumi Devi, destroy my sins."

And you must worship the Lord Hari, after your daily rituals, either as an idol or as a yantra drawn upon consecrated ground, or in the sun, in water, in fire or your Guru.

You must intone this other mantra of invocation of the Lord.

"Namastubhya bhagavate purushaaya mahiyase;
Sarvabhutanivaasaaya Vasudevaya Saakshine...

I worship You, Holy Vasudeva, who are the indweller, the pervador of all things. You are the great illumination, the omnipresent, omniscient One, the witness of all things.

I salute You, who are sukshma and sthula, subtle and gross, who are Purusha and Pradhana. You are the only One that knows the twenty-one evolutes that grow from Pradhana; You are He who is the origin of the samkhya.

I salute You that bestow the fruit of yagñas, and are also the yagna itself as told in the Veda. The two cornerstones, Prayadiya and Udayaniya, are your head; the three Savannas are your legs, the four Vedas are your horns, the seven metres or verses are your hands.

I salute you who are both Siva the benign and Rudra the ferocious; You are he that holds the Shakti; you are the lord of all knowledge and learning, of all the arts, and the elements, too.

I salute you, O Hiranyagarbha, O Prana, Soul of the universe. I salute you who have all the power of the final yoga as your form, who are the origin and the first teacher of yoga.

I salute you, O Hari; You are the primordial Deity, the witness of all things. You are the Rishis Nara Narayana. I worship you, whose skin is like an emerald, who have the Devi Sri beside you, who are the Lord of the Trimurti, who wear the robe of yellow silk.

You are the he that gives the greatest boons; you are the one that all souls should choose to be their dearest friend. The Sages whose minds are yoked choose only you, none else, nothing else. These, who desire nothing but the final goal, worship you.

Anvavartanta yam Devah Srishva taptaadapadyayoh;
Sprihayanta Ivaamodam Bhagavanmey praseedataam.

Lord, whom the Devas and Mahalakshmi adore just to breathe the fragrance of your feet like lotuses, bless me!"

When you have invoked Mahavishnu with this mantra, and he appears before you, animating his idol or the yantra upon sacred ground, worship him with padya and arghya. Offer him the golden paste of sandalwood, offer him wildflower garlands, and bathe his icon in milk.

Offer the Blue Lord, the eternal One, yellow robes of silk, a sacred thread sanctified with mantras, with ornaments, incense; worship him with the waving of lamps, and, most of all, worship him with his mantra of twelve syllables *Aum Namo Bhagavate Vasudevayah*!

Make an offering to the Lord of rice cooked in milk, with ghee and jaggery. Offer this in the fire, chanting the mantra. Offer holy water, and betel leaves. These offerings of food may be given to a bhakta, or eat them yourself. After this is done, chant *Aum Namo Bhagavate Vasudevayah* a hundred and eight times.

Now make a pradakshina round the holy idol and prostrate before it in sashtanga namaskara, the posture of eight limbs laid upon the ground. Set the flowers and the rest of the offerings you make upon your own head, and lay the idol you fashioned to rest. Feed at least two brahmanas with the rice payasa you made.

Eat yourself, with their permission, what is left of the offering, with his friends and relatives. Be continent that night; and from the next day, the first morning of the vow, until the last day of the payovrata; you must awake before the sun rises, bathe yourself and bathe the God in milk and offer worship.

You, the bhakta, must live on just milk for the next twelve days, offer havis in the fire and feed holy men. Every day, you must observe this vrata perfectly offering mantras, havis and homa. You must be restrained, avoiding every luxury – sleeping only on the ground on a bed of grass, bathing at the three sandhyas, at dawn, noon and dusk.

You must keep a vow of mowna, speaking only of the Lord, only chanting his mantras, and abjure every sensual indulgence, be they the pettiest pleasure or the rarest luxury. You must not harm any living creature and your mind must be full of just the Lord.

On the thirteenth day of the bright fortnight, you must bathe Hari's idol with panchamrita. Make sure that experts in the art perform this ritual bath. Payasa, rice boiled in milk, must be offered to Vishnu riding on golden Garuda's back. Once the offering has been made, then you must partake of the payasa, for auspicious indeed is it to eat what you have laid at God's feet; it draws down Krishna's choicest blessings.

Those who have helped with your vrata, and your gurus, must be honoured with generous gifts of silks, ornaments and cows. Why, pleasing your masters is like pleasing the Blue God himself. Dakshina must be offered the acharyas, brahmanas and the officiating priests. Everyone that has attended your sacrifice must be fed until they are sated and can eat no more: this includes members of every caste and the lowest outcaste, too; for they are all seen as living portions of the Lord.

The blind, the sick, the beggars must all be fed, since there is no higher worship than this. Only now, should you, the sacrificer, and your family eat, last. For everyday worship, song and dance, chanting of Vedic hymns – all these are recommended, as long as they are done reverently.

It was the Lord Brahma that taught me the way of the ritual I have just told you about, the Payovrata. Fortunate Aditi, if you worship Narayana with this vow, he will not fail to give you whatever boon you want from him. The Payovrata is called the sarvayagna and the sarvavrata – the universal sacrifice and the universal vow. It is the quintessential charity and austerity, quite simply because it pleases Vishnu.

It is also the highest penance, knowledge and the famed disciplines yama and niyama, which are restraining the senses and then the mind. Noble wife, there is no higher spiritual discipline than pleasing the Lord.

Perform the Payovrata and he shall give you whatever you want, and soon,' Kashyapa Muni said to the grieving mother of the Devas," said Suka to the king.

ADITI'S VISION

SUKA CONTINUED, "ADITI KEPT THE PAYOVRATA FOR TWELVE DAYS, immaculately. She meditated upon God, the Mahapurusha. She made a chariot of her intellect, her mind the reins, and she yoked the wild horses that were her senses. She made a single point of her thought and fixed that on the Lord Vasudeva, the Paramatman.

Sooner than she expected, O Parikshit, the Lord Vishnu appeared before her in a dazzling vision. He wore brilliant pitambara robes, was four-armed, and carried the Panchajanya, the Sudarshana, the Kaumodaki and the Saringa in each of his four hands. His complexion was of a deep blue raincloud.

Crying out in ecstasy to see him, she rose and prostrated at his feet. The fine hairs on her body stood on end; she trembled for excitement and joy; her eyes welled with tears. She rose again and stood quivering before Hari, her palms joined together, speechless.

She wanted to sing his praises, but she could only stand there silent, drinking the sight of him into her very soul – he the lord of all sacrifices and rituals. Slowly, her first shock of excitement subsided and she composed herself somewhat. Now she began to eulogize him, her voice still unsteady for the tide of feelings that swept her heart.

Aditi said,

'Yagnesha Yaganapurusha Achyuta Teerthapaada Teerthasvah Shravanamangalanaamadheyah.

Aapannaloka Vrijinopa Shamodayadya Sham Nah Kridheesha Bhagavannasi Deenanaatha...

You bestow the fruit of every yagna, You are the form of every yagna; You never decay; You have holy salvational feet; we are sanctified to hear your legends; your names are the most auspicious things to listen to.

You incarnate yourself to save your worshippers from evil. Bless us, O Protector of the sick and the stricken, the sorrowing and the suffering.

I salute You, who are the form of the universe. You have assumed the three gunas to create, preserve and destroy the worlds and all that is in them. Your consciousness is measurelessly refulgent and you dispel the last vestiges of ignorance. You are also forever absorbed in your own spirit, your eternal soul.

Lord you are he that removes every obstacle from the paths of your bhaktas; You are he that burns up their every sorrow. If You are pleased with anyone, why, there is nothing that being cannot then have. Longevity you give, beauty, untold riches, freedom of the three realms, Swarga, Bhumi and Patala, all the great occult siddhis, dharma, artha and kama. Finally, You give moksha, too, when your devotee realises the Brahman and that he or she is one with You.

These are what You give as boons, O Vishnu. What then is it for You to help a bhakta to vanquish an enemy?'

Vishnu, the lotus-eyed Lord, who owns every glory and dwells in every heart, heard Aditi out in silence, then said to her, 'Devamaata, Mother of the Devas, I am not unaware of what you want. I have long since heard your prayers that your sons, Indra and his brothers, have back their position and fortune, which Bali and the Asuras have taken from them.

You want to see the Demons defeated, and yourself standing among your triumphant sons. Why, Aditi, I see in your heart the wish to see the Asuras' wives sobbing over their husbands' dismembered corpses! You dream of seeing Indra and his brothers restored to power in heaven and dallying with their women in peace and grace in the Nandana. You want to see them as sovereigns of the three worlds again, surrounded by plenitude and the happiness that wealth and power bring.

Yet, O Aditi, some of the holiest Rishis, Bhrigu's sons, more powerful than even you can imagine, protect Virochana's son Bali and his Asuras. The Daityas are practically invincible. Yet, I will find a way to assuage your grief, for you kept the Payovrata in my name and you have sung a stotra of adoration to me.'

Vishnu paused a moment in thought, then a smile dawned on his face, his perfect and awesome face, before which there was never any other. Slowly, he said, 'Why, for your vrata and your stotra and for your husband Kashyapa Muni's tapasya, I will incarnate myself in amsa as your son.

Sweet Aditi, don't ever tell anyone what I have promised you even if they ask; for great and divine intentions must be secret if they are to bear fruit. Meditate upon this form of mine that you see before you and resort to your husband with love.'

With that, Vishnu vanished. A glowing, joyful Aditi went back to Kashyapa. In his samadhi, the Maharishi had already seen what the Lord revealed to his wife. Why, in his profound trance, that greatest Muni felt the Blue God enter his body mystically; he felt Hari enter his very seed.

That night, after his long abstinence, Kashyapa Muni made love to Aditi. He did so as fiercely as the wild north wind gusts through a forest, and the trees bend their crowns before him, and are ignited when he rubs them together by his force. Kashyapa ejaculated his sacred and potent seed, which the Lord had infused with His spirit, into his woman, as she lay in delirium.

In that delirium, Aditi conceived, just as the forest takes fire. Brahma on high knew Who the child was that the mother of the Devas had in her womb, and in soft joy the four-faced Creator hymned that foetus.

Brahma said, '*Jayorugaaya Bhagavanurukrama Namostute; Namo Bhramanyadevaayah Trigunaayah Namo Namah. Namaste Prishniarbhaayah Vedhase; Trinaabhaaya Triprishtaaya Shipivishtaaya Vishnave...*

Lord of awesome strides, I salute You! Again and again I salute You, who are devoted to your bhaktas, who become the three gunas. I worship You who were born from the womb of Prishni, who was this same Aditi in her last birth. You contain the three Vedas within Yourself; You are the Creator of the three *worlds from your navel, the Creator of everything, O Vishnu. I worship You whose brilliance exceeds all the stars.*

I worship You that pervade every being, even the most brutish. You are the beginning of the universe; You are its middle and its end as well. They call You the Ultimate One, of infinite powers.

As a great river sweeps away everything in its flow, so do You take all things that exist when their time comes, to their ends. You are the source of this world of beings that move and the motionless ones. You are the maker of the Prajapatis, too. As the boat is to the drowning man, You are the only hope of the suffering Devas.'

Thus sang Brahma," said Suka, the inspired.

VAMANA COMES TO MAHABALI'S YAGNA

"THEN, THE LORD CAME FORTH FROM ADITI. HIS EYES WERE LIKE LOTUS petals. He wore pitambara robes and was four-armed, with a conch, mace, disk and a thousand-petalled lotus in four exquisite hands. His colour was a clear, deep blue. His face shone and he wore earrings, shaped like matsyas, the fish that he had incarnated as once.

The Srivatsa whorl was upon his chest and he was born with bright ornaments, a crown, a girdle and anklets. He wore a wildflower garland, a vanamala around which bees swarmed, drunk on the honey of the flowers. The Kaustubha ruby glowed like a crimson planet at his throat.

When he was born as Aditi's son, Vishnu scattered the darkness in Prajapati Kashyapa's asrama like a sun. The four quarters grew still, the oceans became calm and humankind rejoiced because a wondrous season spread across the earth like magic: a quintessential spring. Joy swept creation, on high, on earth, in the zone between, upon the summits of great mountains, through the hearts of birds and beasts, in the fathomless minds of Rishis, everywhere and in every being, inexplicably.

He was born at the auspicious hour that men call abhijit, the hour of victory. He was born on the sacred day that is known as Srava dwadasi, during which the moon was in the constellation Sravana. It seemed that every planet and stellar sign that spangled the sky was perfectly positioned in places of extreme fortune. For, of course, this was a birth decided upon even before the stars were made!

It was noon of dwadasi, the twelfth day of the fortnight; the Munis call this dwadasi Vijaya dwadasi, too. As soon as he was born, the firmament filled mysteriously with unearthly music. Sankhas boomed across the clear blue sky; panava and mridanga sounded and flowed with an awesome symphony of turiyas and numberless other instruments – a song of the spheres!

Gandharva voices, like which there are no others anywhere, sang to this music, singly, in chorus, and Apsara women danced on thin air. Celestial beings of every hue, Devas, Manus, Pitrs, Agnis, Siddhas, Vidyadharas, Kimpurushas, Kinnaras, Charanas, Yakshas, Rakshasas, Garuda and his great avians, the mightiest Nagas – all these rained down the most exotic blooms of heaven upon the asrama where the Lord had incarnated himself.

An awed, blissful Aditi gazed at her Godchild, and could not take her eyes off him. Kashyapa Prajapati saw his blue form and could not believe, for all his great wisdom, that Vishnu had been born as his son, by the Lord's own maya. Narayana is inscrutable, the senses cannot perceive him; yet, here he had taken a form of flesh and bore all the signs of the eternal Blue One, so that his human parents and all the others in their hermitage knew that this was, indeed, Him.

He was scintillating, a sliver of the first of all lights. At first, he was born in the very same four-armed form that Aditi had beheld him during her Payovrata. Now, suddenly, in the wink of an eye, they saw him transformed – he became a brahmacharin and a Vamana, a divine Dwarf-child!

Seeing the change, understanding its miraculous paradox, the Rishis of the asrama cried out in rapture. Now Kashyapa Prajapati gathered all the Sages together and performed birth rites for the Vamana. After the upanayanam, Savita, Surya Deva came down to teach the infant the Gayatri mantra. Brihaspati tied the sacred thread of the dvija round his small and shining body. Kashyapa invested him with a girdle of munja grass.

Bhumi Devi brought him the hide of a black deer to wear across his chest; Soma Deva, who is the lord of the forests and green things of the earth, gave him a fine staff; his mother Aditi gave him a soft saffron loincloth; Indra, God of the skies, gave him a parasol.

Brahma brought the Vamana a kamandalu, the water-vessel that all brahmanas carry. The Saptarishis brought him very special blades of kusa grass and the Devi Saraswati, mother of learning and knowledge, gave him a string of holy beads for his japa.

When the Vamana's upanayanam was completed, Kubera, lord of wealth, gave him a begging bowl, such as all brahmanas must have, and the Mother of the Universe, the Devi Uma, placed the first alms he received in that simple bowl, his first bhiksha. They say, O Kshatriya, that the little Brahmana Avatara was brighter than the other Gods who had come to the ceremony of his investiture with the sacred thread. He was brighter than all of them together and the Brahmarishis who had come to Kashyapa Muni's asrama from distant corners of the worlds.

The Vamana piled a holy fire and lit it, chanting the appropriate mantras. He set twigs from sacred trees round the fire and worshipped Agni, offering the twigs into the flames.

Now there came word to that same sabha of holy ones in that hermitage that Mahabali, lord of the Asuras, sovereign of the worlds, had begun an Aswamedha yagna, a horse sacrifice. His priests were the brahmanas of the line of Bhrigu, and, of course, his Guru Sukra Bhargava was chief among them.

After his own upanayanam, the young Vamana, the Avatara, set out for Bali's yagnashala. Though he was so diminutive, the earth trembled at his tread. Sukra and the Bhrigus saw him approach their sacrifice for Bali, on the northern banks of the Narmada, in a place called Bhrigukaccha, like the sun rising at dawn!

Parikshit, before the splendour of that Dwarf, the combined lustre of those greatest brahmanas paled and was but a shade. They wondered if he was Agni Deva or Surya the Sun or Brahma's son Sanatkumara come to attend the Demon's sacrifice to subdue the quarters. Vamana Deva walked into the yagnashala with a kamandalu full of holy water, a staff and a parasol.

The little brahmacharin wore his girdle of munja grass; across his slim breast he wore the hide of the black antelope, in the manner of yagnopavita. He wore his hair in jata, matted dreadlocks. He was so irradiant, and his presence such that, as he entered the yagnashala, the Bhrigus, their sishyas and Agni Deva rose in reverence to receive him, though they did not know who he was.

Mahabali, master of the yagna, rose and folded his hands and bent his head before the shining Dwarf. In utter delight, the Asura offered the Vamana a seat of honour. The righteous Demon's eyes never left the Dwarf's perfectly proportioned limbs, his wonderfully handsome face.

Bali washed the Vamana's feet and worshipped him that plays in the hearts of those that have vairagya, detachment. Virochana's wise son poured the water with which he washed the Vamana's feet over his own head. You do know, Parikshit, that even the Lord Siva devoutly wears the waters that have flowed over Vishnupaada, the feet of the Blue God, upon his head – as the Ganga!

Mahabali said in his great and powerful voice, so very gently, worshipfully, "*Swagatam Te Namasubhyam Kim Karavaam Te; Brahmarishinaam Tapah Saakshaanmanye Tvaryyavapurdharam...*

I welcome you, Holy One, and I salute you! My eyes see you and my heart knows that you are the embodiment of the final tapasya, which gives their enlightenment to Brahmarishis. Your coming here today to my home has brought fulfilment to the souls of my ancestors and purified my dynasty for countless generations to come. You have made my yagna complete and perfect, in all its parts.

I poured the water with which I washed your feet over my head. That water has purified me and now the offerings that I make to the sacred agni shall prove to be effectual. Why, this yagnashala and this region of the earth have been sanctified by the touch of your feet, by your presence here.'

After a moment's pause, while his eyes never left the Vamana's face, Bali said, 'But I presume that you have come to my yagna seeking some diksha, young Brahmacharin? Ask me for anything, and you shall have it. Let it be the finest cows, any amount of gold, a mansion, food and drink, a woman for your wife, lordship over villages, horses and chariots, anything at all that takes your fancy.'

So said the noble emperor of the Demons," Sri Suka said to Parikshit.

WHAT THE VAMANA WANTED

"THE VAMANA, THE LORD COME AS A HUMAN DWARF, HEARD THE sincerity and love in the voice of Virochana's son, the mighty Asura. The Avatara was pleased.

The Vamana said, 'Blessed Bali you are noble indeed! It is plain that Sukra Bhargava of the line of Bhrigu is your Guru and that Prahlada, who was the greatest of bhaktas and the most reposed of men, was your ancestor.

Why, in all your great lineage, there has never been born a king that refused to give what a brahmana asked him for, nor one so mean of spirit that he gave his word and then broke it. So, too, there was never a prince or a king in your royal family that ever fled a battle. No, yours is a line of heroes, great Bali, and in your matchless clan Prahlada glows like the full moon in his glory.

Hiranyaksha was a sovereign born into your clan. He ranged the earth with his mace in his hand and no one dared stand against him.' The Vamana smiled now, 'Why, they say that even the Lord Vishnu vanquished Hiranyaksha only after a great battle, when the Blue God came as the Varaha and raised the earth out of the depths of the sea upon his flashing tusks. So even was that contention that, though he prevailed, Vishnu hardly thought of himself as a victor.

Hiranyaksha's brother Hiranyakashyapu stormed into Vaikuntha like an unimaginable Yama, to avenge his brother. Vishnu saw him coming, and so dreadful was he, that the Blue God decided to hide from him. He knew there was just one place in creation where Hiranyakashyapu would not look for him.

Mahavishnu made himself smaller than atoms and the Demon breathed him in through his nose. Hari knew that the Daitya would never look within himself, for any reason, ever. Hiranyakashyapu combed Vaikuntha but did not find its Lord. Roaring like the clouds of the Pralaya, he combed the universe – the earth, heaven, the endless sky, the four quarters, the oceans, the fourteen realms that enfold one another. He did not find Hari anywhere.

Hiranyakashyapu said to himself, *There is nowhere that I have not searched for my brother's killer. It seems that he has taken the path from which there is no return. With death enmity ends, and so does mine with Vishnu now.* And finally Vishnu came as the Narasimha to slay that Demon.

Hiranyakashyapu's grandson, Prahlada's son Virochana, always revered the Rishis with all his heart. There was nothing he would not do for them. So, when the Devas went to him as Sages and begged for his life as alms, he did not refuse them, though he knew these were no Munis but the Gods.

I see, O Bali, that you are as full of dharma as your sires were, that your gurus have taught you well.'

Now the Vamana paused and Bali still stood gazing at the exquisite and original Dwarf before him with adoring eyes. The Lord's small Incarnation continued, the smile flickering still on his fine lips, 'I have indeed come to you for alms, Sovereign of the worlds, and I know that you are the most generous soul alive and you will not deny me what I want.

O Asura, I do not want any of the extravagant gifts that you offered me as bhiksha. I only seek a strip of land from you upon which I might sit in dhyana. I know that a brahmana must never take more than what he needs as alms, for then he will not commit any sin of greed. All I ask for is a piece of land that I can measure with three strides of these legs of mine: that is all I need for my tapasya.'

Now Bali frowned. He said, 'Divine and splendid child, the wise will surely endorse your simplicity, but it seems to me that you are naïve. It seems to me that you do not know your own interests.

First, you sing my praises and those of my ancestors. I am Bali, master of Swarga, Bhumi and Patala, and I can gift you a continent if I choose. But then, immature as you are, you ask me for just three paces of land. Ah, you must be a fool, young one! I am Bali and I believe that anyone who comes to me for alms or a gift should never in his life have to ask anyone else for anything at all. So, child, ask me for land if that is what you want, but ask for enough land upon which to maintain yourself for the rest of your life.'

The Lord replied, smiling, 'O King, not all the treasures in the universe will suffice to please a man who has no control over his senses. If I am not satisfied with three paces of land, not having all of Jambu Dwipa with its nine continents from you will make me happy. For then, I will want to acquire all the seven Dwipas.

O Bali, I have heard told that Emperors like Prithu and Gaya, who did indeed own the seven Dwipas, were not content with their wealth, nor with all the pleasures that their power and riches could buy.

The man who is happy with whatever fate brings him: he is the only happy one, for he has no attachments to bind his heart. And truly, for him who is not master of his own mind of what use shall owning Swarga, Bhumi and Patala be? Samsara ensnares a man by his desires, for desire is the worst curse, it is insatiable – the desire for wealth and pleasure. Freedom and true joy come only from contentment with whatever chance brings, for that is vairagya, detachment, indifference to the material universe.

When a Sage is content with whatever chance offers him, his spirit grows powerful and his soul's aura shines through brightly. But possessions and the attachment and lust for them dull the light of the Atman, and dampen joy even as water does a flame.

So, my kind lord, though you are beyond any doubt the most munificent of kings, I shall take no more than three paces of earth from you, which I can bestride with these legs of mine. And I shall be entirely content. Wealth is useful and a cause of joy when one has exactly as much as one needs, neither less nor more. Three paces of land are what I need, no less no more, and with them I shall be truly delighted.'

Bali listened to the slight youth and laughed aloud and in some uncanny joy at what he heard. He took up the vessel of holy water, so he could sanctify the gift, and said, 'Then, wonderful boy, you shall have exactly what you want from me, neither less, nor more!'

By now, Sukra Deva had realised who the young brahmana was. As his sishya, Bali, king of the Asuras, was about to make his gift, his master seized his arm and whispered urgently, '*Esha Vairochane Saakshaat Bhagavan Vishnuravyaya; Kashyapa Aditerjaato Devaanaam Karyasaadhaka*...

O Son of Virochana, this is God Himself, Vishnu, who has been born as Kashyapa and Aditi's son to help the Devas get what they want. You should never have promised to give him three paces of land, without knowing what harm it might bring to you. Ah, I fear your very race is on the brink of ruin because of what you have done.

Hari has come as a brahmacharin and he shall take everything that you own – your sovereignty, your power, wealth, your glory and fame, all your punya – as alms, and make a gift of it to Indra. Don't you realise what you have promised him, O Bali? This Vamana can assume his Viswarupa, his Cosmic Form, and then he shall measure the universe with three strides!

Ah foolish king, it is not three paces of earth but everything you own that you have given away to Vishnu. What will you do now? With his first stride he will cover the earth, with his second the firmament, and his body shall fill all the space between. Where will he plant his foot for the third pace of land you have sworn to give him?

You will not be able to keep your word to him, Bali. And for that you will find punishment for yourself – a long stay in Patala. Daana is surely the greatest punya, but never the charity that imperils oneself or one's living. Indeed, charity, sacrifices and austerity are necessary for those that have a means of livelihood in this world. It is the happy man that gives his time and wealth for yagnas and for charity, for spreading his fame and renown, for increasing his wealth, for pleasure, and to help his friends and relatives and to support his clan and his race.

Lord of Asuras, listen to what the Vedas say about truth and falsehood. Truth is what one accepts, saying "yea". Falshood is what one rejects, saying "nay". Truth is both the flower and the fruit of every embodied being. Remember, O Bali, that only as long as you live can you bear the bloom and fruit of truth. The dead man bears neither; he is of no use to any of the living once he dies.

Yet the source of the body is passion, which is not the truth. And so, if you take away this living body altogether from falsehood, it will cease to exist like an uprooted plant. So existence requires falsehood and passion to support it, as well as it does the truth. Such is life's paradox. The Vedas condemn only falsehood in excess of what life requires to sustain the body.

Do you know what the sacred syllable *AUM* means? It means *"I give"*, and thus that one's self is the fountainhead of everything one owns, that all a man's wealth flows out from himself. So it means to deplete oneself in giving. When a man says *AUM* or gives away some portion of what he has, he depletes himself just by that much. He can continue to survive upon what remains and to increase again, as well.

But if a man unwisely says *"AUM"* if someone asks him for everything he has, he will have nothing left for himself to live off. In short, he will not continue to live. Thus, the Veda advises that one must maintain some falsehood in one's life in order to exist. To say "nay" out of necessity, to refuse someone that comes begging for everything that one owns, is the way to preserve oneself, to continue being wealthy and thus, also, to add to oneself again.

Yet a man should not refuse a supplicant anything reasonable that he is asked for. For to bring upon oneself the reputation of being known as a miser or greedy is terrible; and dishonour is worse than death. A man who loses honour is like a walking corpse even if he breathes. So, O Mahabali, gifts must always be given, but with discrimination.

And if, having given it, you are reluctant to break your word, all the Shastras say there are exigencies in which a man may even lie – when he wants to please or attract a woman; jokingly; to confirm a marriage; to preserve his livelihood; to save himself from death; to save a Rishi or any creature or fellow man that is in danger.

You, my sishya, are surely in the gravest danger of losing not merely everything that you own, but your life,' said Sukracharya."

THE VAMANA REVEALS HIMSELF

SRI SUKA CONTINUED, "MAHABALI WAS QUIET, WHILE HE HEARD OUT his master, the high priest of his yagna. Then he replied, 'Acharya, whatever you say about the dharma of a grihasta, that his deeds should never jeopardise his life, his wealth or his happiness, is no doubt true.

But, O Sukra, I am Prahlada's grandson! How can I break my sacred word that I have already given this young Brahmacharin? How can I do that and live with myself in peace? Bhumi Devi has said "I can support anyone except a liar". The Earth herself says that there is no greater sin than lying or breaking one's solemn word.

Ah, nothing frightens me more than breaking faith with a holy brahmana – not losing everything I own, being poor, not death or even hell. Guru, everything that one owns in this life, all one's possessions and power are lost the moment one dies. Why should I not relinquish them for my honour while I am alive?

The holy one, the Brahmacharin, has asked me for three paces of earth. If I give him any less, he will not be satisfied in his heart. What use, then, shall my gift be? What purpose shall it serve? Why, Gurudeva, you know that Dadichi and Sibi gave their very lives for the sake of the world. Then how can I hesitate to give up possession of the insignificant earth or anything else that I might own?

Wisest, time will surely consume this earth, over which my race has held sway by dint of its valour. The Asuras have become strangers to fear and never flee battle. But time can never consume our honour.

Holy Sukra Deva, so many of my warriors have sacrificed their bodies in war for my sake, when they might have fled. But few indeed are they that will give away their wealth to a worthy cause or person, unselfishly, and in faith. The illumined soul delights in every opportunity he finds to help the needy or the suffering.

I know the untold satisfaction I have felt by being of some help or support to great souls like you. I must give the Brahmacharin what he asks. Maharishi, I have seen how you and others like you make offerings to Vishnu with such reverence and devotion at every yagna. If this brilliant Dwarf is indeed that same Vishnu, as you say he is, I will certainly give him whatever he wants from me, regardless of whether he comes to bless or to harm me, and be it the very earth that he wants from me.

Even if he uses guile to make me his prisoner, I will neither injure him nor resist, since he has come as a brahmana, as if in fear – though I am innocent of any crime. If he is truly Vishnu, renowned for being the Holiest One, and he wants to swell that renown by vanquishing me, then he will surely kill me in battle and take the earth for himself. If he is any less, an impostor, then he will die at my hands if he dares fight me,' said Virochana's son to his Guru.

Whereupon, Sukra became incensed and cursed his sishya for disregarding his advice, indeed belittling it. Said Sukra Bhargava, Guru of the Asuras, 'You think you are wise and that you know everything, but you are just arrogant and a fool! You dare disobey me, Bali? I curse you that you shall lose all your wealth and power, you shall lose your kingdom, your very life!'

But Bali was not to be deterred. He worshipped the Vamana with the apposite rituals and then offered him the gift he had asked for – three paces of land, sanctifying it by sprinkling holy water. The Demon's wife, Vindhyaavali, came forward, bejewelled and adorned for the Aswamedha yagna and with a golden urn full of more holy water. Bali washed the mystic Dwarf's feet with that water yet again and once more poured the water over his own head. A rain of flowers fell out of the sky over Mahabali of perfect dharma and a scent of heaven swept the yagnashala.

Unworldly music was heard on high. Drums resounded in intricate rhythms and every manner of wondrous instrument played. Deva, Gandharva, Vidyadhara, Siddha, Charana, Apsara, Kinnara and Kimpurusha broke into sublime song. They sang, 'Though he knows he will lose all he owns, this magnificent hero has made an offering of the three worlds to his enemy! Who is greater than the Asura Bali?'

Once the offering was made formally, just as Sukra had warned, the Vamana, the little Dwarf, began to grow! Vishnu assumed his Cosmic Form, his Viswarupa. That Form contained all Prakriti within Itself – the earth, sky, the four quarters, heaven, the fourteen realms and all the oceans that encircle them, all created beings, the animals and men, the Rishis, the Devas and Asuras, all the celestial beings and indeed everything.

Bali, his priests and his family, stood gazing upon the Lord's Viswarupa, for there was nothing else anywhere to look at. They saw the universe; they saw the gunas manifested; the panchamahabhutas, the elements; the indriyas, the great senses and their objects; they saw the quintessential mind and all embodied creatures.

Mahabali saw the Patalas upon the soles of the Vamana's feet; he saw the Earth on the Viswarupa's feet, all the mountains upon his cosmic ankles. The Demon saw the birds of the air in the Form's knees and the wind in his thigh. Sandhya was the Vamana's raiment; his genitals contained the Prajapatis.

Virochana's son, at the heart of silence, saw the race of Asuras and himself, too, on Vishnu's lips. His navel was the sky, the seven seas were his belly and the galaxies were spangled across his chest. Bali beheld eternal Dharma in the Vamana's heart; Rita, cosmic order, and Satya, the truth, were upon his breast.

Soma the Moon was in the Dwarf's mind, the Devi Mahalakshmi was a lotus whorled upon his chest. The metres of the Vedas and every sound ever created were in his throat. Indra and the Devas were upon his arms; the four quarters were in his ears; Swarga and Devaloka were on the crown of his head.

The clouds were in his hair; akasa in his nose; the sun in his eyes and fire was his face. Bali saw the Veda in the speech of that Purusha; Varuna was upon his tongue; the injunctions and taboos of the Veda were upon his eyebrows; day and night were in his eyelids. His forehead contained wrath and his lips, greed.

Lust was in that Cosmic Person's sense of touch; the water of every sea in his semen. Adharma was at his back, sacrifice in his gait, death in his shadow, delusion in his laughter; and all green living things were his hair.

Mahabali saw the rivers in the Vamana's arteries and veins, the rocks and stones of every world in his fingernails. The just Demon saw Brahma in Mahavishnu's intellect and the Devas and the Rishis in his senses. He saw in that Cosmic Form all things, moving and still, from past, present and future.

The awestruck, humbled Asura saw the Sudarshana Chakra, the bow Saringa whose string twanged like the thunder of the Pralaya; he saw the sea-conch the Panchajanya whose bass was no less like the boom of the apocalyptic thunder. Bali saw Narayana's mace, the Kaumodaki, his sword the Vidyadhara in its scabbard marked with the crescent moon. He saw the inexhaustible quiver that welled with arrows and astras as time does with moments.

Sunanda and the other main servitors of Vishnu surrounded him; the Lokapalas waited upon him. The God of Gods stood there resplendent in his crown, bracelets, his earrings shaped like fish. The Srivatsa marked his breast and the Kaustubha. He wore a golden girdle past describing around his waist; he wore bright yellow silk against his dark blue skin. He wore an immortal vanamala, around which black honeybees swarmed deliriously.

The Lord Vamana stood before Mahabali, ready to measure his three paces of land. Bali stood before the Lord, stunned. The Cosmic Dwarf raised his leg and bestrode all the Earth that Bali ruled with his first stride. He filled the sky and the directions by spreading his thousand arms. His second stride traversed the firmament of all the stars; it encompassed

Swarga, and the worlds beyond – Maharloka, Janaloka, Tapoloka and the final realm Satyaloka.

There was nothing left to bestride, nowhere for the Dwarf to measure with his third stride," Suka told the Pandava king.

BALI BOUND

SUKA DEVA, VYASA'S ILLUMINED SON, CONTINUED, "NOW BRAHMA SAW Vishnu's toes, their nails lambent, in Satyaloka, where the Creator dwells. He saw those nails were so brilliant that the light of Satyaloka paled before them.

Taking with him the greatest Rishis, like Marichi, eternal Brahmacharins like Sadananda, other mighty Yogins who had made ashes of their every karma with the fire of yoga, and yet others that had gained Satyaloka by their bhakti, taking the Gods of the Vedas and the Upavedas, the Gods that embodied logic and reason, bringing the embodied Puranas, Ithihasas and Samhitas, Brahma came to worship the Vamana's sacred feet.

Everyone who came with the four-faced Creator had attained Satyaloka, which is a realm where no man can come by mere ritual observances. Brahma, who had been born from the lotus that sprouted from Narayana's navel, worshipped Vishnu's blue feet with flowers, even as those feet rose through the other reams majestically into Satyaloka.

Brahma worshipped those feet with water, and the water that he poured onto Vishnu's feet became the Akasa Ganga, river of heaven, because it touched those feet. Flowing through the three worlds, she purifies them all.

Now Brahma and his Sages offered other worship at the feet of the Vamana. By now, he was a Dwarf again, having resumed that form. They gave him scented water for padya, garlands of divine flowers, sandalwood paste with which to anoint himself, other unguents and the finest incense to be found anywhere. They waved lamps before him, offered him rice grains, yava and durva grasses.

They sang to the Holy Dwarf, hymning him, singing the praises of the Blue God. Chiranjivi Jambavan, immortal king of bears, most blessed among bhaktas, flashed through the universe, beating out sheer joy on a drum, crying out the great news that the Lord had arrived!

But the Asuras of Bali were far from pleased. They saw that their master had lost everything he owned to two strides of Him that had come disguised as a brahmana dwarf. Angrily, they cried among themselves, 'This is no Brahmacharin. This is Vishnu, lord of deceivers, come to serve the Devas' purpose!'

'Our Lord Bali sat at his yagna having eschewed violence as the sacrificer. The charlatan midget tricked him, when he knew our king would not take up arms against him.'

'The dwarf tricked him into losing all that he owned. Bali is a man of such dharma that he never lies or breaks his word; Vishnu knew he could not possibly forswear himself when he has taken the vows to perform an Aswamedha yagna.'

'But we are not bound by our master's vow. It is our dharma to slay this pretender, this enemy of our race!'

Roaring, those fearsome Demons rushed to seize up their weapons, swords, tridents and spears, bows and arrows, to attack the Vamana, to kill him. The sovereign Bali gave them neither command nor permission for what they did. Laughing, great and wonderful weapons in their hands, Vishnu's servitors barred the Demons' way.

Nanada, Sunanda, Jaya, Vijaya, Prabala, Bala, Kumuda, Kumudaksha, Visvaksena, Garuda, Jayanta, Srutadeva, Pushpadanta the Gandharva, Sattvata and a host of other lords of light, each one mighty as ten thousand elephants, began to massacre Bali's Asuras.

The hepless Bali remembered his Guru Sukra's curse. Seeing his warriors being slaughtered like children, he cried, 'Stop! Rahu, Nemi, listen to me! Stop fighting and turn back, for the tide of fortune has turned against us.'

They stared numbly at him, and he said, 'Who can vanquish Him that decides all our fates, who metes out joy and pain to us as we deserve? Once, this Mahavishnu favoured us and we conquered the Devas. The same Bhagavan has turned against us now and is on the side of our enemies.

Not by the four diplomacies, not with the greatest armies, the wisest ministers, the finest intelligence, mighty fortresses, the most potent oshadhis and mantras can we hope to vanquish fate. When destiny favoured us, you routed these same servants of Vishnu that now cut you down and roar in victory. When the wheel of time turns in our favour again, we shall triumph over these once more and rise again in power and majesty.

Until then, we must retreat and wait in patience, for that time will surely come.'

When his Asuras heard how grave his tone was, they paused just a moment while their comrades' blood lapped at their feet. Then the Demons turned and fled the battle, as they never had before. They plunged down into Rasatala, the deepest under-world.

Now, on the day that was meant for the ritual of drinking the Soma rasa, Garuda, Vishnu's mount and king of birds, bound Virochana's son the great Bali with Varuna's noose, his fluid and legendary paasa. Cries of lament arose from heaven and earth to see the righteous Demon bound.

Having lost his all, in two cosmic paces, Bali stood a captive before the Vamana. The Divine Dwarf said to the Demon, 'Asura, you promised me three paces of earth. Two I have taken and my leg is raised to claim the third, but I can find nowhere to plant my foot. Heaven and Earth, which belonged to you, I have measured with two strides and everything that you owned is exhausted.

There is nowhere for me to plant my third stride. You have broken your sacred word to me, Demon, and your place is in hell. Why, your master Sukra cursed you to this fate and it is truly the fate of one that fails to keep his given word. Heaven is far from you now, Bali, and damnation at hand. For an age you shall reap the fruit of deceiving me in the hubris of your wealth and power!' said the Vamana," Suka said to Parikshit.

BALI SAVED

"BUT BALI WAS CALM AS A LAKE UPON WHICH NO BREATH OF BREEZE stirs. In perfect calm he replied to the Cosmic Dwarf come to punish him, 'O God that are renowned through the three worlds for being holy! If you mean to show that I, Bali, forswore myself, I am as determined to keep my oath to you. Three paces of earth I promised you, and three paces you shall have.'

Smiling, the knowing Vamana said in a voice of thunder, 'You have no earth left for me to set down my third stride. My foot is raised, where shall I put it?'

Bali replied, 'Upon my head, Lord! For I am more afraid of being called a liar and a man that broke his solemn oath than I am of hell, of sorrow, of penury, or any more dreadful misfortune that you wish to inflict upon me.

You want to punish me, O Vamana, and for me there could be no higher blessing! For when you punish someone you surely make ashes of his sins and save his soul. You are not only the Guru of the Devas, by your scourges upon us, you are the Guru of us Asuras, too. You save us with fire, Lord!

You bring us down, who would otherwise be forever blinded by the delusions that prosperity brings with it. You always enlighten us with adversity and defeat. I know that countless Asuras have found moksha by hating you and being delivered by their obsession. Hatred, too, can become bhakti in a wink, if it is ardent enough.

As for me, Lord, I am not shamed that you have bound me in Varuna's noose. My Pitamaha Prahlada was your bhakta. His own father tormented him for being so, and your own people call Prahlada a Mahatman.

I can never forget what my grandfather Prahlada said: *Of what use is this body, which must die despite all the care one lavishes on it? Of what use are sons, who only plunder your wealth and relatives are surely one's worst enemies in friendly guise. Of what final comfort is a wife, who only binds one inevitably deeper and deeper in samsara? All these only waste one's brief life away in trivial and pointless pursuits.*

And these being his beliefs, he abandoned everything worldly; he abandoned his own people, and sought refuge instead at your feet. There he sought changeless refuge, freedom from fear – though you were always known as the One that kills our people, the Asuras.'

Bali paused a moment, and still perfectly tranquil, he continued, 'I am so fortunate that fate has brought me down from my lofty place as king of the worlds, in moments, and brought me to your feet! Wealth, prosperity and position dull the mind and deceive us that we are not always living in the jaws of death.'

As Bali spoke, suddenly Prahlada himself, the Lord's most beloved bhakta, arrived there, glowing like the moon when he is full and just rising into the night sky. Bali saw his grandsire wearing yellow raiment, his eyes large and graceful as lotus petals, his complexion brilliantly black, like antimony, his arms long and his appearance altogether unimaginably handsome.

Bound still by Garuda in Varuna's paasa, Bali could not pay obeisance to his ancestor by prostrating before him. This saddened him and he bowed his head low and tears filled his eyes and trickled down his cheeks.

Prahlada saw his God Vishnu, surrounded by his servitors Nanda, Sunanda and the rest, and tears of joy filled his eyes. The great Asura approached the Lord with his head bowed in devotion, and lay at the Vamana's sacred feet in sashtanga namaskaara, the prostration of eight limbs. As it always was with him when he saw Narayana, the hair on Prahlada's body stood on end in the ecstasy he felt, in tide.

Rising, Prahlada said, 'Lord, you made him Indra and master of the three worlds. Now you have taken back what you gave. I believe with all my heart that you have blessed my grandchild, for this shall finally benefit him beyond calculation. The rich and powerful man invariably becomes insensitive and coarse, be he the best among men. Prosperity inevitably brings the blindness of pride with it, even to the most learned and restrained of men.

No man is unaffected by prosperity so he can steadily tread the path of the spirit, which is all that finally matters. I salute you, O my precious Lord, master and witness of the worlds!'

Now Brahma began to speak to the Vamana, but Bali's wife Vindhyaavali interrupted him. Trembling to see her husband bound in fluid coils, she bent low before the Lord and said, 'Lord, you created all the worlds for your sport! And they always have and always shall belong only to you, from the beginning unto the very end of time.

Foolish and perverse men, kings, think that they are masters of the world or parts of it, when in truth you are the only sovereign ever. What does any man, even the greatest or most powerful one own, that he might offer to you? Why, no man owns even his life, but is merely deluded that he does. How can my husband offer you anything at all when the three realms were always just yours anyway?'

She fell quiet, and tears flowed down her face. Now Brahma said in genuine concern, 'Almighty Lord, creator of all things, O you who dwell in all beings! Bali has lost everything he owned; does he deserve to be bound as well? He offered you everything that was his, which he gained with great karma – the three lokas – with no hesitation or regret.

Just by offering you holy water and some green blades of durva grass, your bhaktas attain Vaikuntha. This Asura has made an offering of the three worlds at your feet. How does he deserve punishment and shame, instead of great reward?'

The Vamana replied in his voice deeper than ages, 'Brahma, those that I truly want to bless I first deprive of their wealth. For wealth makes a man arrogant, and then he sins against dharma, the world and against me. Every jiva is subject to karma. Each one is born repeatedly, and dies as well, in millions of myriad species, until at last he finds a human birth.

If you find a man who is fortunate in terms of his birth, his appearance and prosperity, his work, his learning and wealth, and is yet free from vanity, be certain that I have blessed that man. For, usually, great prosperity brings pride with it and pride will inevitably keep a man from evolving spiritually. I blessed Dhruva and Prahlada, so not wealth or power swayed them from their single goal, which was to attain to me.'

The splendid Dwarf paused. Smiling and entirely beatific, he continued, 'This great Bali, lord of the Danavas and the Daityas, the sons of Danu and Diti, is a jewel of his race. Why, this Asura has conquered my maya, which the most profound Rishis hardly do. Just look at him – he is faced with complete annihilation and he is perfectly calm. He has lost everything he had in the twinkling of an eye, he is bound with Varuna's paasa, staring death in the face, and he is as tranquil as a Muni lost in dhyana. His Guru cursed him, yet he did not flinch from dharma and would not break his word to me.

I shall bless this greatest of kings, Brahma, as you want me to and as he only deserves. I will bless him as I seldom bless even a Deva. During the Manvantara of the Manu Savarni, Bali shall be the Indra and lord of the three realms. Until then, let him and all his family and subjects dwell in the under-world called Sutala, where even the Devas long to live, and where Viswakarman has created untold marvels. And because Mahabali shall rule in Sutala, I bless that world to be free from every sorrow – from anxiety, weakness, lethargy, defeat and the rest.

I bless you, Mahabali, greatest king! Go forth to Sutala and rule. Not the Lokapalas shall come to that realm and vanquish you there and if any Asura of the Patalas dares attack you, he will die by my Sudarshana Chakra, for I myself will protect you and yours in that under-world.

You will feel my presence always, noble son of Virochana. Dwelling among Danava and Daityas, demonic impulses might arise in your heart – the will to power, lust and the like. But you will find me near you, in your very heart and these desires will wane by my grace upon you,' the Vamana said to Bali."

BALI GOES TO SUTALA

SRI SUKA CONTINUED HIS MAHAPURANA, TO THE PANDAVA EMPEROR cursed to die of snakebite in a few days. "When the Paramatman said all this to him, Bali felt a sea of bhakti surging in his heart. His hands folded in worship, his eyes streaming tears of rapture, his voice choked with indescribable joy, the Demon spoke to the Cosmic Dwarf, Vishnu come as the Vamana.

'I have heard that you bless those that surrender to you. But Lord, here you have blessed me though I have not even prostrated before you, O Highest. Yet, it is true that I did think to prostrate myself. I am an Asura, the lowest of Asuras, and you have blessed me with a gift that even the Lokapalas have never yet had from you.'

Meanwhile, Varuna's paasa had vanished from Bali's body and now he lay flat on his face in adoration at the Vamana's feet. He prostrated before Brahma and Rudra, as well, and then with all his people, Bali of taintless dharma went in joy to the nether realms and to Sutala.

Thus, Mahavishnu came as the Vamana to answer Aditi's prayers. He set his third stride on Bali's head and pushed him lovingly, painlessly, down into Sutala and then restored Devaloka and the sovereignty over the three worlds to Indra. Curiously, in this incarnation Vishnu was born as Indra's younger brother, and so the Vamana is also known as Upendra.

When Prahlada saw his grandson Bali released from the coils of Varuna's noose and blessed by the Lord, he said in fervour, 'Not Brahma, Rudra or Sri Lakshmi has ever been blessed like this by you. You have become the dwarapalaka and the protector of the Asuras of Sutala!

Brahma and the other Gods rule their worlds by your grace, because they have worshipped your lotus feet. But, wonder of wonders, now the race of Asuras, race of darkness, has found favour with you. Your mercy, Lord, is truly without limit or condition. How marvellous is your cosmic lila!

You are the universal Kalpataru, Hari, and no one who resorts to you is ever turned away. Yet, you do favour your bhaktas over the rest; for, even the Kalpataru, tree of heaven, tree of wishes, gives its magic fruit only to those that approach it.'

The Vamana said, 'Precious Prahlada, you also go to Sutala and live in joy and peace. Remain there with your grandson Bali, and be a mentor to your clan and all your people. You will see me at your door every single day, with my mace in my hand, and the bliss you will find in that vision will dissolve your final illusions and you will become free.'

Prahlada, the wise, the pure, never hesitated a moment before he did what Vishnu asked of him. He, too, went down to Sutala. Now Narayana, the Dwarf, spoke to Sukra, the Guru of the Asuras, who sat at the head of the priests of the incomplete yagna.

'Holy One, I beg you, perform the rites required to exorcise the breach of your sishya Bali's yagna. Why, the mere glance of one as wise and holy as you will suffice to repair any flaw.'

Sukra replied, 'Lord, you are the soul of every yagna, its embodiment and fruit. You have been worshipped here and the sacrificer has given you everything he owned as his offering. How can there be any breach or flaw in this yagna?

Why, at any sacrifice, whatever accidental fault occurs in the mantras that are intoned, the rites, the time, the place, the receiver of gifts, is always corrected by the chanting of your sacred names. My Lord, at this yagna, the sacrificer has offered his all to you. Which sacrifice through all time can be more perfect than this one?'

Pausing a moment, Sukra Deva went on, 'Yet, since you ask me, I will do as you say and formally complete the interrupted yagna. For truly, Lord, there is no punya to equal doing what you ask!'

Sukra and the other Rishis, of the line of Bhrigu, performed the rituals to complete the sacrifice begun by Bali.

So it was, O Parikshit, that the Lord Mahavishnu restored Indra's kingdom to him – by begging for it as alms from Indra's enemies who had taken his heaven from him in battle! All the Divine Ones who had gathered there – Brahma, Lord of all Prajapatis, the Devas, the Rishis, the Pitrs and Manus, Daksha, Bhrigu, Angiras, Sanaka and his brothers, Rudra – together now crowned the Avatara Vamana, the son of Kashyapa and Aditi, monarch of the three realms and sovereign of all the Lokapalas.

Upendra had the power to protect and further the path of the spirit, they knew; he would nurture and guard the Vedas, the Devas and Rishis, dharma, everything sacred, prosperity, everything auspicious, yagnas, swarga and moksha, too. Joy coursed through the three worlds and the hearts of all their creatures.

Now Indra rose back into his heavens along Devayana, the path of the Gods. The glorious Vamana went before him, with Brahma's blessing and the Lokapalas around him. Thus Indra recovered his boundless wealth and kingdom and enjoyed them again, without any fear of Asuras – by Vishnu's grace.

Brahma, Rudra, Sanaka and his brother Rishis, Bhrigu and his Munis, the Pitrs and the Siddhas and the Devas, all went to their own worlds and abodes, many in their vimanas, singing the praises of the Lord Hari and some also singing their gratitude to Aditi, who had now become the mother of Mahavishnu's Avatara.

Parikshit, jewel of your line, this is the legend of Vamana, which washes away the sins of those that listen to it. My son, the Lord's power and glory are infinite. Anyone that wants to enumerate the wonders of Narayana might well begin by counting the specks of dust that make up this earth.

Inconceivable is the Lord, and knowable, even remotely, only by himself. Have you heard what Maharishi Vasishta, greatest of Sages, blessed with fathomless spiritual insight, once said of the Blue God? He said, 'Where is the man born until this time that has plumbed the depths of the Lord's greatness? For sure, none in the future shall come close, either.'

He that hears this tale of Vishnu will one day, certainly, attain to the final beatitude to which any jiva can aspire. If this story of the Vamana Avarata is recounted at any sacrifice, ritual or undertaking, devoted to men, the manes or the Gods, that rite or karma will be perfect, all its defects removed by the legend," Sri Suka said.

THE MATSYA AVATARA

RAJA PARIKSHIT NOW SAID, "HOLY ONE, TELL ME ABOUT THE LORD'S incarnation as the Matsya, the mystic Fish. How did the God of Gods come down to the world in such a low and unevolved form, even as if he was bound by karma?"

Suka told him the legend of the Matsyavatara.

"Vishnu incarnates himself to help the helpless, the Rishis and the Devas, good men of dharma, men of the Veda. He also comes to protect the four aims of life – dharma, artha, kama and moksha.

He pervades all beings, all things, high and low, rather like the air. Yet, he is a Spirit and unaffected by the evolution of the creatures in whom he dwells, by their qualities of body and mind.

As the last Kalpa ended and Brahma wanted to fall asleep at his cosmic twilight, the universe was flooded by a Naimittika Pralaya, a deluge. The three worlds lay submerged after that endless rain. Brahma was tired and as sleep overcame him, he yawned and the Veda fell out of his mouth. An Asura called Hayagriva, who was nearby, snatched up the holy Veda in a flash. The Lord incarnated himself as a Fish to retrieve the sacred book.

In that last Kalpa, once a king of deep dharma called Satyavrata sat in tapasya, worshipping the Blue God. The king lived sipping just water. Parikshit, it was this same Satyavrata who was born as Vivaswan, the Sun God's child and became a Manu in this Kalpa. Then he would be called Vaivaswata and Sraddha Deva.

One evening, at the third sandhya, Satyavrata sat performing jalatarpana, water rituals, beside the river Kritamala, when a minuscule and exceptional fish, smaller than a minnow, swam into his cupped palms. Satyavrata was king of Dravida, the southern country, and he poured the water in his hands and the little fish in it back into the river.

The fish said to him in a piteous voice, 'O King, your mercy and generosity towards the poor and the suffering are a legend across the worlds! Then why do you cast me back into the river, where I am always in fear for my life from bigger fish?'

At which, immediately, Satyavrata scooped the fish up again and decided to give it sanctuary. The king put the fish into his water vessel and brought it back to his asrama where he was performing tapasya. Of course, he had no notion that the remarkable talking fish was the Lord himself, come to bless him.

After a spare meal, Satyavrata fell asleep that night and heard strange sounds just as dawn broke. He saw the tiny fish had grown so much in a night that his water vessel could no longer contain it.

The fish spoke again to the king, 'I cannot stay in your kamandalu anymore; it is too small for me. I beg you put me in a larger vessel.'

The king let it into a bigger earthen pot and filled that with water. But in a moment, the fish was as long as his arm and as wide and thick too! In a few moments more, it was thrice that size and cried again to the austere king, 'Raja, look at me, I am much too big for this waterpot! Find me a bigger place to dwell.'

The king fetched the vessel to the pond in the hermitage and emptied it there, with the fish. In an hour, the fish filled the pond with its supernatural growth and cried again to the king, 'O King, look how small this pond is for me. I need at least a lake to stay in comfortably. Find me a lake where there are no crocodiles.'

With some difficulty, and using a net and many of his men, Satyavrata took the fish to a lake. But in hours it filled the lake and the king had it hauled on wheels, using a legion of his men to a bigger lake, large as a small sea. The fish filled this in half a day and cried pitiably to the king once more.

The king mustered an army and had the fish brought to the sea. It said to him, as always in the chastest language, 'Satyavrata, you must not put me into the ocean, for surely a whale will devour me if you do.'

Now Satyavrata spoke to the fish. He said, 'Who are you, O Fish? We have never seen a creature as extraordinary as you are. You speak, and you grow as no other fish ever. In a day, you have filled a lake of a hundred yojanas.'

He paused, then said with conviction, 'You can only be the Lord Hari! And you have come as a Fish to bless the worlds. Paramatman, I salute you that are the master of creation, nurture and dissolution. You are the soul of all of us, who seek salvation and refuge in you.

Every Avatara you have come as has been to save the worlds. Tell me, my Lord, why have you now come as this awesome Fish? Lotus-eyed Vishnu, unlike serving the mortal, worshipping you is never in vain – look how you have come to me in this exceptional form! I am certain this is the fruit of my bhakti.'

The Lord is always absolutely loving towards his bhaktas. He had now come to swim and sport in the waters of the Pralaya. He had also come to bless his devotees, and he said to Satyavrata, 'O Raja, on the seventh day from today, Swarga, Bhumi and Patala shall drown in the waters of the Naimittika Pralaya.

When the earth is submerged I will send you a ship. You must board that craft with the seeds of all the trees and plants that you can gather, with a pair of every species of animal and bird, and with the Saptarishis. You will need to navigate the pitch darkness of the Pralaya and the seven Sages shall shine as beacons of light for you in the night of nights.

When the most violent waves and winds rock your ship, I will appear at its prow and you can moor your vessel to my fin, using Vasuki as your rope. I will guide your ship through the waters of the deluge until Brahma's night ends and he awakens and begins a new day and a fresh creation.

And through the perfect night of Brahma's sleep, I shall reveal my inmost secrets to you upon the ultimate ocean, and you will realise the Truth, the Brahman, and you will find moksha and become free.'

With this, the sacred Matsya vanished. Satyavrata began his wait for the Pralaya to begin. He made a seat of durva grasses for himself on the ground, their blades pointing to the east. The king sat on the grass seat, facing the north-east and meditated upon the feet of the Blue God, Hari who had incarnated himself as the Fish.

Dense black clouds filled the sky above the king at dhyana – the clouds of the Pralaya. Thunder and lightning gashed the sky and it began to rain. Torrents fell from on high and the oceans rose and broke their shores. Tidal waves swept across the earth, drowning the continents. The loftiest mountains were submerged.

Meanwhile, as the Deluge began, Satyavrata remembered the Lord's promise to him and immediately a vast and exquisite ship appeared on the sea before him. The king had already collected all the seeds of green living things, sacred trees and precious plants. He had called every species of bird and beast to him, a pair of each one. The Saptarishi also arrived on that shore.

Together, they boarded the Blue God's crystal ship that seemed to be made of the shards of a rainbow. The Saptarishi now said to the king, 'Satyavrata, meditate upon Keshava, the Lord Mahavishnu! For he shall be our refuge and our saviour.'

The king set his mind in dhyana upon Narayana and the Lord appeared as the resplendent golden Fish, with a single dorsal fin. Except now he was a hundred thousand yojanas long! Vasuki, emperor of serpents, appeared beside the ship and Satyavrata asked the Naaga to be the rope with which to secure his ship to the Matysa's mountainous fin.

Once this was achieved, Satyavrata's heart filled with uncanny ecstasy and he began to hymn Vishnu with a stotra:

'Anaadyavidyo Apahataatma Samvidastanmoola Samsaara parishramaaturah.
Yadrishchaye Ahopasrita Yamanuryuvimuktido Nah Paramo Gurubhavaan…

Men who have forgotten the Atman through the darkness of ignorance suffer endlessly in samsara. Sometimes they find your grace and by that grace surrender themselves to you and attain to you. May you, O Enabler of salvation, always be our teacher.

An ignorant man is bound by his karma. He continues to perform more karma in the pursuit of pleasure and binds himself deeper into the darkness. He finds further misery for himself. Karma performed for the sake of pleasure is egoistic and selfish; it can only bring suffering. Only karma performed for you, dedicated to you, can free the shackled jiva.

Lord let it please you to sever the knot in the heart of ignorance – the one that binds into darkness, the one that identifies the self with the body.

One cannot purify gold and silver by washing them; they must be purified in fire. So, too, karma cannot purify the self. A jiva can only find illumination by burning his sins in the fire of serving you, worshipping you: in the fire of your grace. Karma is only one limb of that service.

Only your grace, Lord, can lead us from the ignorant dark into light. You are the eternal One, the final Sovereign. You are the greatest Guru, by serving whom the stains of the heart and the mind are removed and the soul is restored to its primeval glory. I beg you, O Vishnu, enlighten us!

I seek sanctuary in you, the Paramapurusha. For a mote of your grace is infinitely more potent than the blessings of all the other Gods, Rishis and Gurus combined. An ignorant man taking another for his master is surely like a blind man asking another sightless one to show him the way.

But we want only you as our preceptor. You are the final Awareness, illumined by yourself. You are like the sun that lights up the world; you give consciousness and brightness to the senses.

Lesser masters can lead us towards material gain; they only enmesh us further in the tangles of delusion, of samsara, the unending cycle of births and rebirths. But you teach only the wisdom of the immortal and eternal Atman – the pristine beginning to which we must finally return. You teach the only true path, the easy one that only appears to be difficult.

You are the only real friend of every creature and of all the worlds. You are the only wellwisher, the only Lord, our soul, the one that grants our deepest wish, our single prayer. But we that are blinded by ignorance do not see you glorious and living in our very hearts. So it is with all the worlds.

I seek your shelter, my Lord, Noblest; teach me the way of the Atman. Speak to me; turn my darkness into light. Cut the knot of ignorance that binds the eternal spirit into body after body, birth after birth, death after death. O great Matsya, reveal Yourself to me!'

The Blue God, who had incarnated himself as the Fish of interminable proportions, the Primeval One, swam where he would in the waters of the Deluge. He sported! As he went across those endless waters, he spoke to the worshipful Rajarishi and taught him the deepest secrets and every nuance of the eternal Atman.

This discourse by the sportive and wonderful Fish is known as the Matsya Purana, in which Vishnu dwelt upon the three paths to the Soul – gyana, karma and bhakti: the way of knowledge, the way of deeds and that of devotion.

Some say that the Earth herself was the ship in which Satyavrata sailed upon the waters of the cosmic Pralaya! In it, the king and the seven Sages listened to the Golden Fish's Song of Truth, and it scattered the last vestiges of ignorance in Satyavrata's heart so he was filled by divine light and became free.

Meanwhile, the Lord had slain the horse-headed Demon Hayagriva When Brahma awoke from his slumber of a thousand ages, Vishnu returned to the four-headed Pitama, the Veda he had taken back from the Asura.

Having been enlightened by the Matsya Avatara upon the ocean of the Pralaya, king Satyavrata became the Manu of the next Kalpa, this present one. He is known as Vaivaswata Manu.

Those that know say that hearing the Matsya Purana, the conversation between the Fish and the king frees a man of all his sins. The bhakta that worships Hari every day by recounting or chanting the legend of this Incarnation will have all his wishes fulfilled and finally he will find moksha, too.

I prostrate before the Blue God, the Cause of all causes, who came as a Fish and returned the lost Veda to Brahma. With all my heart I worship the Golden Fish that taught the Rajarishi Satyavrata the most profound and hermetic secrets of the Atman," said the blessed Vyasa's son. Suka Deva was an enlightened one himself, and he saw all this with visionary sight, in the infinite freedom of his timeless soul.

Skandha 9

THE TALE OF SUDYUMNA

RAJA PARIKSHIT SAID TO DWAIPAYANA'S BLESSED SON, GREATEST OF the island-born Mahakavi's disciples, "Lord, I have listened to your magnificent account of the Manvantaras and the legends of the omniscient and omnipotent Vishnu and his Avataras during their span.

You have told me how king Satyavrata served the Lord in the last Kalpa and was enlightened by him. He is now Manu of this Kalpa, the son of Vaivaswan, named Vaivaswata. I also know that Ikshvaku was Vaivaswata Manu's son, as were some other great kshatriyas.

Master of the *Bhagavata Purana*, I would hear about the line of Ikshvaku and the other sons of Vaivaswata Manu from you. Most of all tell me about the great bhaktas, the rajarishis born in their house, for their fame reaches down the ages right into our times. Their piety is renowned and I want to hear about all of them – those that lived in the past, those that are among us now and those to come."

Suka said, "Parantapa, O hero, listen to tales of the greater families of the line of Satyavrata, who became a Manu. Not a hundred years would suffice to tell about all Manu's descendants.

When the Kalpa ended, only the Supreme Soul, the Paramapurusha, who dwells in every creature and world, high and low, remained. The universe had dissolved into his Being. Only he existed. He lay upon the waters of the single sea of the Deluge and the dissolution – Ekarnava – upon his serpent bed.

A golden lotus pushed its way out from his navel and in it Brahma appeared – born of himself and four-headed. From Brahma's ancestral mind, first of all Marichi was born. Then Kashyapa was born. To Kashyapa Prajapati, from Daksha's daughter Aditi, Vivaswan was born.

Vivaswan's wife was Samjna and their son was Sraaddha Deva, who became the first Manu. He was known for his restraint and his mastery over himself, and he was called Vaivaswata Manu. He begot ten sons on his wife Sraddha – Ikshvaku, Nriga, Saryati, Dishta, Dhrishta, Karushaka, Narishyanta, Prishadhra, Nabhaga and Kavi.

Before Ikshvaku was born, the Manu Sraadhha Deva had no children. The Maharishi Vasishta, of untold spiritual powers, performed a yagna to Mitra and Varuna for the Manu – a putrakama yagna, so he would have children. The Manu's wife, Sraddha, who was keeping the Payovrata, went secretly to the sacrificing priest and said that she would like to have a daughter.

At the adhvaryu priest's command, the hotr priest, who performed the actual rituals under the former's instructions, focused his mind in dhyana and made an offering into the holy agni. He chanted the *vashat* mantra to fulfil Sraddha Devi's desire for a daughter.

The Manu himself was performing the sacrifice for a son; but when the hotr priest chanted the *vashat* mantra, a daughter was born to him and, in times to come, she became renowned as Ila. The Manu Sraaddha Deva was unhappy with the birth of a female child.

He came to Vasishta and asked petulantly, 'Holy one, how did this happen? That a yagna performed by a great Vaidik brahmana like you bears such a contrary fruit. I thought you were masters of all the mantras; besides, you are masters of your senses, jitendriyas. Then how is it that I have a daughter and not a son, as if the Devas themselves have turned to deceit and mockery?'

Vasishta realised what had happened, how the hotr brahmana had changed the sankalpa, the boon sought, from the sacrifice. He said to Ravi, Surya Deva's son, 'Your hotr priest changed the mantra he chanted to the *vashat*, which is why you have a daughter instead of a son. But I will use my punya and see that you have a son as well.'

The Manu wondered how the Sage would do that, now that the yagna was concluded and he already had a daughter. Vasishta sat in intense dhyana and invoked Vishnu, the Original One, with sacred mantras. Worshipped by so devout a Sage, Narayana granted what the Rishi asked of him. He made the princess Ila a powerful prince; the daughter became a mighty son. In joy, Suryaputra Sraaddha Deva named his boy Sudyumna.'

Suka paused, for he was coming to the most curious part of his story. Slowly, smiling a little, he resumed.

'Raja, one day Prince Sudyumna mounted a fine stallion of the Sindhu breed and set out on a hunt. He wore silver mail, carried his jewelled bow, his quiver of arrows and astras and rode north after a stag he spotted. He rode with a party of courtiers, all of them keen and expert huntsmen like himself. The creature had the most splendid set of antlers, but proved a swift and elusive quarry. Long and hard the prince rode after the deer.

Sudyumna rode into a forest in a hidden valley of Meru, where it happened that the Lord Siva was with Parvati, in fact making love with her. An exceptional spell had been cast on that forest because the Devi Uma was naked there with her lord.

The moment Sudyumna entered the charmed jungle, he found himself transformed into a woman! So also, his stallion beneath him had turned into a mare. All his warriors who rode with him had become women and their mounts had turned into mares. The prince and his party gazed at one another in shock.'

Parikshit asked, 'Holy Suka, what was the enchantment upon that forest? Who turned the prince and his party into women? This is the strangest thing I ever heard.'

Suka replied, 'Once, some great Sages, who were so illustrious that the brightness of their bodies dispelled the darkness of the directions and paled any other lights beside them, went to that forest to meet Siva, lord of the mountain. It happened that Parvati was sitting in the Lord's lap without a stitch upon her. She leapt up in great embarrassment and clothed herself.

When the Rishis saw that the divine couple was making love, they turned away hurriedly and went instead to Mount Badari, to the asrama of Nara Narayana. To mollify the distraught and angry Uma, Siva pronounced that any male creature that entered their love forest would instantly be transformed into a female, so that never again would any man see Parvati naked.

From that day, men would always avoid that forest with the spell laid over it. But Sudymuna and his companions had never heard of the place before, and now, changed into women, they rode their mares from forest to forest, hoping to find release somewhere from their peculiar predicament. As they ranged the pristine places, Sudyumna's companions saw some forest Gandharvas, whom they found irresistible. They became the mates of those magical minstrels and stayed behind with them.

One day, Sudyumna came to Soma's mercurial son, Budha Deva's hermitage in another vana. Budha saw her, and she was now a very lovely woman, and fell in love with her. Sudyumna, too, was irresistibly attracted to the God. She had all the desires of a woman now and they became lovers in the cottage of logs beside the clear lake where the Moon God's son sat in dhyana.

In time, Sudyumna gave birth to a magnificent son and they named him Pururavas. O Parikshit, it is also told that while Sudyumna was a woman, her old memories and her conflicting identity tormented her at times. One day, she met Vasishta in the forest where she lived now with her son and her husband, whenever he came to stay on earth.

She fell at the Sage's feet and begged him to restore her manhood to her. Vasishta knew how she had been transformed and worshipped Lord Siva. When he appeared in glory before the Rishi, Vasishta implored him to make Sudyumna a man again, for otherwise his father's kingdom would have no male heir.

Siva, as always, was keen to grant his bhakta whatever he wanted. Yet, since the soft and feminine curse of the forest could not be withdrawn entirely, the Lord said, 'Vasishta, it seems your sishya Sudyumna is as precious to you as your own child. Let him be a man for a month and then a woman again the next month, and let him rule.'

And so it came to pass that Sudyumna ruled the earth, as a man for a month and as a woman for another. There was some discontent among his subjects over a king who turned into a queen every other month. But he ruled with wisdom and dharma and the murmurs soon died down and they accepted him as both Sudyumna and Ila.

His sons, as a man, Utkala, Gaya the great and Vimala, became monarchs of the kingdoms of the south. When Sudyumna had been sovereign of the earth for an age, he left the kingdom to his son by Budha Deva, Pururavas, and went away into the forest for ever, to become a hermit, until he found moksha."

MANU'S OTHER SONS AND THEIR DESCENDANTS

SUKA CONTINUED, "WHEN SUDYUMNA RELINQUISHED THE WORLD AND became a Sannyasi in the forest, his father Vaivaswata Manu, Sraaddha Deva, went to the banks of the Yamuna and sat there in tapasya for a hundred years to beget more sons. When a hundred years of dhyana passed, he worshipped Mahavishnu with a putrakama yagna and the Lord blessed him with ten noble and doughty sons, the eldest of whom was Ikshvaku.

Manu made one of his princes, called Prishadhra, the guardian of his herds of cattle. The youth spent his nights without sleep, his sword in his hands, protecting the cattle against predators. One night, a tiger crept into the cow-pen. The herd stampeded, lowing in terror. Prishadhra came running, his sword raised.

The night was dark, with even the stars hidden behind some light clouds, and inside the cattle-shed he mistook a red cow for the tiger and cut its head off with his blade sharper than a razor. It happened that the same sword also took off one of the hunting feline's ears and the beast fled, leaving a trail of blood from its wound.

Prishadhra returned to his watch-post outside the shed, pleased with himself because he thought he had killed the tiger. But in the morning, by light of day, he saw that he had beheaded a sacred brown cow. Word spread through the palace, and with it, shock and outrage that the prince had slaughtered a holy cow.

The prince's Guru promptly cursed him to leave the palace and the city. For though he had killed the cow mistaking it for the tiger, he would become a Sudra for what he had done. Prishadhra accepted the curse humbly, with folded hands. It is told that prince kept a vow of continence for the rest of his life, to expiate his sin, and worshipped Vishnu and Him alone, with single-minded adoration.

Prishadhra was compassionate to every living creature, treating each one as part of himself, and he became an Ekantin, a lone hermit for whom the Lord is everything. Prishadhra was perfectly detached, above desire, and tranquil. He gave up all his possessions and grew used to subsisting on whatever came to him by chance.

The prince ranged the length and breadth of the land, like one who is blind and deaf to everything around him, why, like a madman. He wandered in bliss, for his thought was indrawn and absorbed in the Lord Hari, who was a sea of ecstasy in his melted heart.

One day, he went into a jungle where a fierce forest fire raged, a conflagration that consumed thousands of trees. In complete calm, he offered his body into that fire and found the Parabrahman. He had neither married, nor had any sons, and Prince Prishadhra attained moksha and was never born again.

From his very childhood, Manu Sraaddha Deva's youngest son, Kavi, showed a tendency to renounce all things mundane and pursue the path of the Spirit. When he was barely a youth, he abandoned his family and the kingdom and slipped away quietly into a far forest, where he sat in intense dhyana, meditating upon the refulgent Divinity in his heart. He also attained nirvana and he never married or fathered any sons.

Another son of Vaivaswata Manu was Karusha and he sired a race of kshatriyas named after him as the Kaarushas. They ruled over the northern kingdoms and were kings of dharma, who always revered the Rishis of the world.

Dhrishta, another of Manu's sons, begot the line called the Dhraashtas. But they were such a pure clan that they became brahmanas.

Another of Sraaddha Deva's sons was Nriga. Nriga's son was Sumati and Sumati's son was Bhutajyotis. Bhutajyotis' son was Vasu and his boy was Prateeka, and Prateeka begot Oghavaan. Oghavaan's son was named exactly after his father and his sister was called Oghavati and she married Sudarshana.

Narishyanta was another of Vaivaswata Manu's sons. His son was Chitrasena, who begot Driksha, who sired Meedhvaan, who fathered Koorcha, whose son was Indrasena. Vitihotra was Indrasena's son, and Satyavras was his son; Urusrava was Satyavras' son, and Devadatta was Urusrava's son.

Agnivesya was Devadatta's son, and he was an avatara of Agni Deva. He became renowned as Kaaneena and Jaatukarnya. From this incarnation of the Fire God, there sprang the line of brahmanas called Agnivesyas. This is the line of Narishyanta.

Listen now to the line of Manu's son Dishta. Dishta son was Naabhaaga, but another Naabhaaga, not the great and famous one. He became a Vaisya. His son was Bhaladana, and Bhaladana's son was Vatsapriti. His son was Pramsu, and Pramsu's son was Pramati; Pramati's son was Khanitra and his son was Chaakshusha.

Chakshuhsa's son was Vivimsati, who begot Rambha, whose son Khaninetra was famed for his dharma. Karandhama was Khaninetra's son, and his son was Aveekshit, whose son was Marutta, the great, who became a Chakravarti, an emperor. Angiras' son, Brihaspati's brother Samvarta, was the chief priest at Marutta's imperial yagna.

It is told that never in the times of this earth has there been a sacrifice to compare with Marutta's in grandeur. Every vessel used was made of gold and shone like a sundrop. Indra drank Soma rasa until he was drunk, and the brahmanas had dakshina like no priests had ever received, so bounteous were Marutta's offerings.

The Wind God's companions the Maruts served the food at this sacrifice and the Viswedevas, the lords of the universe, were the guests in the sabha.

Dama was Marutta's son, and his son was Rajyavardhana; Rajyavardhana sired Sudhriti, who begot Nara, who was also known as

Saudhriteya. Nara's son was Kevala, and his son was Bandhumaan, who begot Vegavaan, who begot Bandhu, whose son was Trinabindu.

Trinabindu was the most excellent and exceptional of men and he married an Apsara called Alambushaa. By her, he had many splendid sons and a daughter called Idavida. Idavida married the Rishi Visravas, who was among the most brilliant Sages ever, and who had learnt the art of making himself invisible with maya from his father.

Visravas and Idavida's son was Dhanada, Lord of wealth and the Nine Treasures, otherwise known as Kubera, who is Siva's great bhakta and friend, lord of the Alakananda mountain, lord of the yakshas and Guhyakas, and a Lokapala.

Trinabindu's sons were Visaala, Sunyabandhu and Dhumraketu. Visala founded the city of Vaisali. His son was Hemachandra, whose son was Dhumraaksha, who fathered Samyama, whose sons were Devaja and Krishaasva. Krishaasva's son was Somadatta, who worshipped Narayana with an Asvamedha yagna and was revered by even the greatest masters of yoga.

Somadatta's son was Sumati, whose son was Janamejaya. These kings ruled from Vaisali and continued the renown and the dharma of Trinabindu, the great, Kubera's grandfather."

THE LINE OF SARYAATI

SUKA DEVA WENT ON, "VAIVASWATA MANU'S SON SARYAATI WAS A MASTER of the Veda and knew its deep and true import and purposes. At the sattra of the clan of Angiras, he was the one who explained all the rituals to be performed on the second day.

Saryaati had a lovely, doe-eyed daughter called Sukanya. Once, he went into the jungle with her and a large retinue, to hunt and to enjoy the wilderness. One morning, Sukanya and some of her sakhis wandered away from her father's camp.

As they went along, blithely, the princess came across a large, white anthill in a small clearing. She saw two strange and shining points of light halfway up the mound, as if there were two clusters of glow-worms upon it. The spoilt and playful princess picked up a branch of thorns and thrust it hard at the points of light. Blood spurted from them, and she gave a cry and ran back to the camp.

Now an uncanny malady overtook the king and all those with him in his party; a violent colic gripped them all and they became utterly constipated. None of them could excrete anymore! Also, they were all filled by nameless anxiety and terror.

The astonished Saryaati's suspicions were aroused. He asked his soldiers, 'Did any of you harm Rishi Chyvana of Bhrigu's line, who lives in this forest? My heart tells me that either the Sage or his asrama has been violated, and that is why we have this strange sickness.'

Now Sukanya related how she had poked the points of light in the anthill with the stick of thorns. Saryaati was alarmed, and taking his daughter with him, went at once to the place where the anthill stood. In fact, the Rishi Chyvana sat in that place, steeped in dhyana, and the white ants had built their hillock over him, while he sat lost to the world. The lights the princess Sukanya has seen and then put out had been the Rishi's eyes, glowing with the light of his spirit.

Saryaati fell at the Sage's feet and begged his forgiveness. Chyvana said, 'Your daughter has blinded me. Now give her to me to be my wife and my eyes, or my curse will remain upon you and yours, and you shall die of it.'

With hardly a choice, Saryaati gave his child to be the Sage's wife. Sukanya, in turn, was so contrite that she accepted her fate willingly. Saryaati had the wedding rites performed and returned to his capital. The curse of constipation left him and his men, as also the fear that had robbed them of all their peace.

Chyvana was a notoriously irascible Muni, his temper a fair legend. His blindness made him worse. Yet Sukanya, who had grown in the lap of luxury, attended upon by a hundred sakhis, took to her new life in the wilderness, in a small hut of logs and thatch, remarkably. She served her old husband whom she had inadvertently blinded, with never a murmur of complaint, but looking after his every need as if he was her very life.

Slowly, Chyvana's hostility melted and he came to cherish her more than the eyes she had put out in his face. Then one day, the Aswini Kumaras, who are the physicians of heaven, came down to the earth and saw the lovely Sukanya drawing water from the river near her husband's asrama. They were captivated and followed her to Chyvana's hermitage. The Muni received them cordially and made them welcome.

When they sat together, after the Gods had been offered padya and madhuparka, Chyvana said to them, 'You have great powers, O Aswins. I want a boon from you and in return I will also give you one. You live among the Devas, yet I know that you are not offered the Soma rasa to drink at any yagna.

As you see, I have a young wife but I am an old man and can hardly be attractive to her. But she is loyal and serves me as no one else ever would, indulging my every whim. She married me out of necessity, because she had no choice, but now I would like to see her happy. Tell me, can you give me a handsome and youthful body? If you do, I will arrange for you to partake of the Soma rasa at every yagna with the other Devas.'

The Aswins gazed at the decrepit old hermit: his hair was stringy jata, his body was a mass of wrinkled skin and protruding bones, and a map of varicose veins over all this made him uglier than ever. And to crown it all, he was blind. The heavenly twins had long wanted to drink the Soma rasa with the other Gods. Indeed, the reason why they came down to earth and this forest was to meet Chyvana Muni, for they knew that he was the one who could help them.

Now one of them took the Rishi's gnarled hand and the Aswins led him slowly, supporting him on either side, to a nearby lake, created by them in the space of a magic wish. Sukanya followed behind, wondering what the Devas meant to do.

On the lake's shore, the Aswins said, 'Come, old one, let us immerse ourselves and you shall be as handsome as we are! But there is just one condition, when we come out of the lake, your wife shall choose any of us three to be her lover.'

Chyvana, who felt he had tried his young wife's patience and fidelity for long enough, agreed. The three of them entered the lake and waded into it until the water covered their heads. The lake sparkled in the most unearthly fashion, as if each drop of it was a fluid jewel of Devaloka. As Sukanya watched, rooted, three splendidly handsome young men emerged from the charmed waters – all three were identical, three Aswini Kumaras, instead of two and an aged hermit!

They all wore heavenly raiment, and unworldly ornaments, and certainly each one was everything that any young woman would desire, and more. But, of course, Sukanya could not tell which one was her husband Chyvana. The Aswins were hopeful that she would choose one of them, for they were keen to enjoy such a beautiful young woman, who would not be?

Sukanya gazed from one of the trio to the others, but they were indistinguishable from one another and Chyvana had sworn not to reveal himself. Surely, any of the three would have been as satisfying to a young woman in her sweet prime. Then she fell sobbing on the sands at their feet and cried, 'O Aswini Kumaras, I seek your grace! Tell me which of you three is my husband, for I will kill myself before I am disloyal to him.'

The Aswins were startled – here was a woman who would not betray her husband with a God, even the handsomest one! Blessing Sukanya, they told her which of them was her husband, now as attractive and romantic looking as an Aswini Kumara. They mounted the vimana, the sky craft which materialised before them out of the very air, and flashed away back into their heaven, swiftly as light.

The rejuvenated Sage and his princess wife returned to their hermitage and spent a long honeymoon and both were joyfully absorbed in each other. Chyvana saw for the first time, with his sight that the unearthly physicians had restored, how beautiful his young wife was, and Sukanya, of course, was delighted with him. They often made love all day long, and after, all night too.

Some weeks later, Saryaati returned to the forest and to that hermitage, to visit Maharishi Chyvana and his daughter, to discuss a yagna he had in mind. As he arrived at the edge of the yard of the asrama, a most unexpected spectacle greeted his astonished gaze. He saw his daughter in the arms of a splendid young man, no a God he must be, he was so lustrous. They were lost in an interminable and passionate kiss.

Saryaati stood still as a stone until the kiss ended and the young man went into the cottage, leaving Sukanya in a languid swoon upon the rope cot laid at the steps leading to the kutila. The king strode angrily over to his daughter, who sprang up with a glad cry to see her father, and bent at his feet to have his blessing.

Saryaati neither blessed her nor greeted her with any show of affection. Instead he stepped back from her, and said harshly, 'Wretched child, now what have you done? You have betrayed your husband, Chyvana Muni, whom the world worships. Ah, you are full of lust that you have taken a young stranger for your lover.

You are my child, born into one of the noblest houses on earth. How could you do this, Sukanya? You are a disgrace to me, a blot on all our ancestors. You have brought the mother of all sins upon your father's family and your husband's, too. For generations our children will pay the price for what you have done, O you depraved woman!'

His daughter laughed in her lovely, throaty way and Saryaati saw that there seemed to be no taint of depravity or sin upon her face – she was as pure as she had always been since her infancy.

Sukanya said, 'I have not sinned, O my father. The young man you saw me with is my husband Chyvana Muni of the noble line of Bhrigu! He is your son-in-law, to whom you gave me yourself.'

She told him about the visit of the Aswini Kumaras and the boon her husband had asked them for, so he could be pleasing to her. It was plain to Saryaati that she was not lying to him. Then the Sage himself came out of their kutila, and by the power of his mind, he showed the king both his forms: the old one and the new. Chyvana blessed Saryaati and told him what an ideal and loving wife Sukanya had been.

Saryaati enfolded his daughter in an embrace, crying, 'My child, I am so proud of you!'

Chyvana Muni made Saryaati undertake a Somayagna, at which he used his great spiritual powers to break tradition – he gave the Aswini Kumaras Soma rasa to drink. Indra was incensed. With a roar, he summoned his Vajra, and raised it to kill Chyvana. But Chyvana froze the Deva's hand with a look, and made the Aswin twins drink the nectar of the Moon.

Indra was vanquished by the Sage's power. Thereafter, at every sacrifice where Soma rasa was drunk, the Aswins drank as well, who had in the past been denied because they were mere physicians."

Suka paused, and Parikshit waited in silence for him to resume. Vyasa's enlightened son, master of the Purana, did so in a few moments. "King Saryaati had three sons, Uttaanabarhis, Aanarta and Bhoorishena.

Aanarta had a son called Revata, who built the city of Kusasthali, upon an island in the sea. He ruled his father's kingdom, named after his father, and the surrounding lands from that island city.

Revata had a hundred sons; the eldest was Kakudmi. Kakudmi took his daughter Revati to Brahma's sabha of glory, to ask the Creator to whom he should give her in marriage. Music was playing in Brahma's court, performed by some of the greatest Gandharva minstrels in the universe. Kakudmi was allowed to enter the sabha, but he could not immediately ask Brahma the question he had come to ask the Grandsire of the worlds.

When the music ended, Kakudmi approached Brahma's throne, prostrated in salutation, then told the four-faced God why he had come. To his surprise, Brahma laughed softly at him and said, 'Kshatriya, all the suitors you had in mind for Revati are long since dead and gone! Why, even their great grandchildren's very names have been forgotten in the world, they have been so long dead.'

Kakudmi stared uncomprehendingly at the Creator, who continued gently, 'Child, twenty-seven chaturyugas have passed since you entered my sabha, for time in my realm is very different from on the earth. But now, on earth, Vishnu's amsavatara Balarama lives, the strongest man in the world. Return to Bhumi and give this jewel of a girl to he who has been born to rid the dark world of many burdens.'

Slightly dazed, but very bravely, Kakudmi took Brahma's blessing and returned to his capital with Revati. He found it abandoned by his clan, for fear of Yakshas, and derelict. He asked his way to where Balarama the Yadava lived and gave his daughter to that kshatriya, to be his wife. Then Kakudmi went to the asrama of Nara Narayana upon Mount Badari and spent the rest of his days in tapasya, before being gathered to his ancestors."

THE TALE OF AMBAREESHA

“ANOTHER SON OF VIVASWATA MANU WAS NABHAGA AND HIS SON WAS Naabhaaga. Whilst Naabhaaga, who was the most learned and worthy of his father's sons, was still in gurukula, living in his preceptor's house, studying for longer than most princes did, his brothers partitioned their father's kingdom and wealth. They thought Naabhaaga would never return, but remain a brahmacharin all his life.

But return that prince did, and asked his brothers, ‘Where is my share of the kingdom?’

They said to him, ‘We thought you were not coming back and we have already divided the kingdom amongst us. But you can have our father as your share!’

Naabhaaga seemed content with this, but Nabhaga said to his youngest son, ‘I am no piece of land or property to be enjoyed! Your brothers are tricking you. Don't accept this, my child.

Listen to me. The great Rishis called the Angiras have just begun a sattra, a long yagna. They are learned, yet they are anxious for they do not know the mantras to be chanted after every six days for the rites to the Viswedevas, the Gods of the universe. If you go to their sattra and chant the two suktas for the Viswedevas when their sacrifice ends, they will give you all the wealth that remains after their yagna is over.’

The son did as his father asked; he chanted the stotras to the Viswedevas at the end of the Angiras' sattra. When the yagna ended, the sacrificers rose in wondrous vimanas into Swarga, but not before they left all the vast wealth that remained from the sacrifice to Naabhaaga.

Naabhaaga was about to gather the gold and treasures left at the yagnashala when a dark man arrived from the north and claimed that the wealth from the yagna belonged to him.

Manu's grandson said, 'The Angiras left all this to me, how do you say it belongs to you?'

The black man thought for a moment, then said, 'Let us take our dispute to your father. Surely, you trust him to do right by both of us?'

They went to King Nabhaga, who looked curiously at the dark man that his son had brought. Then he said, 'A long time ago, the Rishis of the earth decided that whatever remained at a yagnashala would belong to Rudra. If Rudra claims what remained from the sattra of the Angiras, it shall belong to him. Otherwise, my son, it is yours for the Sages gave it all to you.'

As soon as he spoke, the black man stood revealed before them, as the Lord Rudra! Naabhaaga prostrated at his feet and cried, 'Forgive me, Lord, I did not know who you were! A thousand times: forgive me, forgive me. All this wealth is yours, not a coin of it mine.'

Siva was pleased. He said kindly, 'Your father divulged the truth when he could have concealed it to favour his son. And you are willing to give me all this wealth, which you direly need, without a moment's thought – for the sake of the truth.

Noble Prince, since this treasure is indeed mine I am happy to give it to you. Besides, when the time comes, I will instruct you both, who know the Veda already, in the deepest secrets of the Brahman.'

And Rudra vanished. Parikshit, Rajan, whoever reads this story with faith in his heart, at dawn and dusk, shall be a wise man, a gyani, and he shall know the Vedas without having ever read them. He will find his spiritual destiny.

Naabhaaga's son was the great Ambareesha, whom not even the curse of Durvasa could affect."

The king said, "I have heard once that Mahamuni Durvasa sent a rakshasa to kill Ambareesha, but the Rajarishi was proof against the demon and his weapon. Tell me about Ambareesha, O sublime Suka Deva."

"Ambareesha was lord of all the world, and its seven continents; incalculable was his wealth, inestimable his power and glory. Yet, he was a Rajarishi truly, for he was always aware that all that wealth and power were evanescent, dreamlike and unreal. He knew that they only made a man blind to the eternal truth of his own soul.

Ambareesha was such a fervent bhakta of the Lord Vishnu that he thought of his boundless kingdom, why the very universe, as just a worthless crumbling clod of earth. He meditated regularly and deeply. He taught himself to think only of Krishna's sacred feet.

He spoke only of the life of Krishna, the Blue God's greatness. Like a common servant, the king would wash and clean the shrines of the Lord throughout his kingdom, wearing valkala and his hair in jata. He loved nothing more than listening to the legends of Krishna and looking at the Lord's images in any form.

The only company that pleased him was that of the Lord's great bhaktas, and he sought such men out at the corners of his empire. The scent he truly adored was of the tulasi, which was once touched by Krishna's feet and still bears their fragrance. The only food Ambareesha ever ate were the leftovers of offerings made to the Blue God. Eating for him was not something he did to satisfy his palate or his hunger, but a devout ritual of sharing and serving, of humbling himself, and of seeking Vishnu's blessing.

He never tired of walking round God's temples in pradakshina, never tired of prostrating himself before his idols and bowing his head in every direction: for he perceived Narayana everywhere. All this Ambareesha, sovereign of the seven continents, did to daily, hourly increase his attachment towards God, his devotion for him.

The king offered all that he did and thought and was to Krishna, the Paramatman who controls the mind and the senses, He that bestows the fruit of every sacrifice. Ambareesha made this his way of life, and always seeking the advice of a learned and wise council of ministers and Rishis, all of whom were also devotees, he ruled the endless earth.

In the heart of the vast desert that faces the current of the river Saraswati, Ambareesha worshipped God with many Asvamedha yagnas. Incomparable

Rishis like Vasishta, Asita, Gautama and others of similar stature were his priests. He spent bounteously on each yagna, performed to bless his awesome kingdom and every living creature in it. No expense was spared, for the king's resources were boundless, as was his bhakti.

At Ambareesha's yagnas, gifts were distributed liberally and every detail of the ritual adhered to immaculately. The priests that sat over his sacrifice wore robes like the raiment of the Gods, indeed they looked like Devas, so splendid were they. The king was as glorious as Indra, but Ambareesha did not perform his yagna for any mundane or heavenly boon.

He and all those with him undertook these yagnas for their own sake, to listen to the legends of the Lord being chanted by the wisest Sages of the earth – this filled them with incomparable ecstasy. They did not care a whit for any pleasure the Earth had to offer, or Swarga, even. For it is true what the ancients say: that those in whom the instinct for the Lord stirs are never again attracted by what Siddhas desire. No desire for any treasure, or any power, held sway over their hearts that had experienced the rapture of the Atman. All external temptations paled beside what they saw and felt within themselves.

Thus, with bhakti and regular prayer, by performing his royal dharma with vairagya, detachment, Ambareesha worshipped Vishnu. And the Lord's grace helped him sever every attachment he may once have had. The king set no store by his home, its luxuries, his sons or relatives, his wife, his great army with untold legions of footsoldiers, cavalry, elephants and chariots, his immense wealth of gold and rare, invaluable gemstones, his awesome weapons – all that he owned.

Why, Vishnu was so pleased with Ambareesha's devotion that he offered him his own Sudarshana Chakra, which protects the Lord's great bhaktas and is a bane to any force that dares attack one.

Ambareesha's queen was as devout as he was. To worship Krishna, they once kept the Dwadasi vrata together, fasting all day and breaking the fast only at night. In the month of Krittika, towards the end of the vow, they fasted for three days and nights; no food passed their lips. They bathed in the Yamuna at this time and prayed to Krishna in the Madhukavana.

The king and queen performed the Mahabhisheka – the ceremony of the sacred bath – with offerings of sandalwood paste, flowers, arghya, silks, gold and jewels. It is told that they distributed six hundred million cows across the world, to the Rishis and their asramas: beautiful beasts, gentle and their milk plenteous and sweet as amrita. He sent them finely caparisoned, their hooves and horns sheathed in gold.

Ambareesha fed all the wise that had come to his abhisheka the most delicious fare and was about to break his own fast, when Durvasa arrived at the sacrifice. The king received his legendary guest with every show of love and reverence, with padya and arghya, and showed him to a seat of honour in the assembly.

Ambareesha said, 'Swami, nothing would please us more than if you eat with us.'

Durvasa, known for his quick temper across the three worlds, accepted graciously and happily; for the king and his queen had shown him such respect. Saying, 'Nothing would please me more than to eat with you,' the Sage went to the midnight-blue Yamuna to bathe before he sat down to partake of the ritual meal.

Ambareesha waited for the Maharishi to return before he broke his own fast, which he must do before noon of the twelfth day of the fortnight of his vow. Only half a muhurta, a few minutes, remained before that time and there was no sign of Durvasa. The king was in a quandary.

He asked some learned brahmanas, 'If I eat before Durvasa returns, I will have insulted him and broken the ancient laws laid down about eating oneself before feeding such a holy one who has come here to be my guest and blessed my vrata. Yet, if I do not eat before the Dwadasi ends, I shall have ruined my vow. What shall I do to avoid sinning?'

The Sages around him had no answer. Then the king himself found what he thought was a way out of his dilemma. He said, 'I will just drink some water to break my fast and eat only after I feed Durvasa Muni. The wise say that drinking water is both like eating, and not eating, too.'

Ambareesha prayed fervently to Krishna and sipped some water to break his fast. Then he waited for Durvasa to return from the river.

Soon enough, after finishing his ablutions and rituals at the Yamuna, the Rishi came back. Ambareesha welcomed him. But Durvasa knew at once what had happened in his absence; he knew by the powers of his mind that the king had already broken his fast by drinking water.

Durvasa's face turned red. His thick brows twitched and arched and his body shook with rage. His features twisted in a snarl and he roared, 'Look at the arrogance of this man, blind with the pride of his wealth and power. He is a savage, with no real bhakti in his heart for Vishnu or for anyone. He imagines that he is a law unto himself, and that he is above dharma.

Base king, you invited me to eat as your guest. But you ate yourself before you fed me. You have insulted me, and I will visit you with the consequences of that!'

Beside himself, blazing in wrath, the Sage pulled a strand of jata from his head. He breathed life into it with a dreadful mantra, and a spirit of fire, a kritya, sprang roaring from that lock of his matted hair. That naked spirit was as fierce as the fire in which the universe is consumed when time ends. It flung its horrible head this way and that; curved sword in hand, it rushed at Ambareesha.

In a wink, a flash, the Lord's Sudarshana Chakra appeared out of nowhere and burnt up that demon: as the forest fire does the serpent in the grass. Occult terror now seized Durvasa Muni and he ran here and there in panic, for the Chakra of the Blue God, which protected his bhakta Ambareesha, pursued the choleric Sage for daring to attack the king of dharma.

Flying though the air, Durvasa finally hid in a cave on golden Mount Meru. But the Chakra found him there and he flew from it again. Durvasa flew to the four quarters, but found no refuge from the awesome Disk of time spewing flames. He crossed the earth and the sky; he tried to find a sanctuary in the depths of the oceans, in heaven, the fourteen worlds. The blazing wheel followed him everywhere.

Durvasa came flying to Brahma's sabha and fell sobbing at the Creator's feet. Tears streaming down his face, the Rishi panted, 'Pitama, save me from Vishnu's Sudarshana Chakra!'

But Brahma replied, 'It is the Kaalatman's weapon that pursues you. Vishnu is He who knits his brow and the universe, even this Satyaloka of mine and I myself, dissolve, when his lila ends, when the Dwiparaardhas are over. You threatened that Blue God's bhakta. Who can save you now, O Durvasa?

Ah, don't you know that Hari commands us all – Siva, me, Daksha, Bhrigu, the Prajapatis, the Lord of the spirits, the Devas, all the Visewdevas – and we obey him with our heads bowed? You have offended his devotee, no one can protect you from his wrath.'

They heard the Chakra arrive hissing in Brahma's Satyaloka, the realm of perfect truth. Abandoned by Brahma, Durvasa flashed away down to the earth again, to sacred Mount Kailasa where Rudra dwells.

Durvasa fell at Rudra's feet and cried, 'Save me from Vishnu's Sudarshana, Lord, only you can!'

But Rudra replied, 'Vishnu is He who wills numberless universes like our own into being and extinction. What can any of us do against his will? Brahma and I, Sanatkumara, Narada, Kapila, Saubhari, Devala, Dharma, Aasuri, Marichi, every other realised man and woman – we are all subject to his maya and none of us has fathomed its nature.

I cannot stop the Sudarshana Chakra, Durvasa. There is only one person who can help you, Vishnu himself. You must go to him.'

Again, Durvasa heard the Chakra raging towards Rudra's opalescent mountain. The panic-stricken Sage flew to Vaikuntha, with the Disk of flames singeing his jata. He fell shaking at the blue feet of Vishnu, who sat with Sri Lakshmi beside him on the throne of the universes.

Durvasa cried, 'Achyuta! Ananta, Infinite One, Lord of us all, who love your bhaktas, O Protector of the worlds! I am a terrible sinner, but I beg you, save me. I did not know who you truly are, or how powerful, and in my vanity I sinned against your bhakta Ambareesha. Tell me how to atone for what I did. Be merciful, O Hari. I know that even souls who find Naraka are saved by chanting your name.'

The Lord said, 'Dvija, I am never free for I am bound by my love for my bhaktas. Why, they are more important to me than even Sri Lakshmi or myself! Tell me, how can I ever abandon these holy ones who surrender their all to me, choosing me over their wives and children, their wealth and homes, the worlds they live in and those to come? Renouncing all these just to worship me.

Why, Maharishi, the affection of these bhaktas of mine, their love for me in all beings, wins my own love as a faithful wife's does her loyal husband. Do you know, Durvasa, that the truest of these bhaktas care only about serving me. They do not care even for the four kinds of mukti: saalokya, being in the same world as me, saameepya, being near me, saarupya, having a form like mine, or even for saayujya, which is actually being one with me.

Mind you, these are theirs for the asking because they have served me. Just think then, Rishi, how much less such men will care for the transient achievements and pleasures of the world. These devotees are my very heart, don't you know, and I am theirs! They know nothing but me, as I do nothing but them: we are each other's sole concern.'

Vishnu spoke gently, with feeling. He paused a moment, then said, 'I cannot help you myself for what you tried to do, the arrogance and enmity that you showed Ambareesha. But go to that king himself, against whom you summoned the kritya to kill him. Most learned and wise Muni, don't you know that to use the black arts against a saint like Ambareesha is to use them against yourself?

Austerity and knowledge surely help the seeker along his way. But the occult powers in the hands of one that has no restraint, one that is vain or perverse – they are dangerous. Durvasa, there is just one way now for you to save yourself. Go and seek Ambareesha's pardon. You will find refuge with him and peace from the Chakra,'" Suka said to the king.

DURVASA AND AMBAREESHA

THE PAURANIKA, VYASA DWAIPAYANA'S SON, THE ILLUMINED SUKA continued his tale of Ambareesha and Durvasa.

"So then Durvasa came to Ambareesha and fell at his feet, crying, 'Save me, O King!'

Ambareesha was taken aback, bashful that such a Rishi had prostrated before him. In that feeling of shyness, he rose and began to chant a stotra in praise of the Sudarshana Chakra, which had flared after Durvasa and still hung fire, ready to consume the irascible Sage.

Ambaeesha sang to the Disk of time:

'Tvam Agnirbhagavan Suryastvam Somojyotisham patih. Tvamaapastvam Kshitirvyoma Vayurmaashrendriyaani cha...

You are the power in fire; you are the sun and the moon that are the lords of the planets. You are water, earth, sky and air, the subtle elements and the senses.

O Sudarshana of the thousand spokes, I salute you! You are Vishnu's favourite weapon; you are the power that subdues every other ayudha. You are the Earth's master. I beg you, Lord, be kind to this Rishi.

You embody the compassion of the Blue God. You are dharma, rita and satya. You are the yagna and he who is worshipped by the yagna. O Auspicious Disk, guardian of dharma, terror of demons who tread the path of sin, I worship you, who are unblemished light, who are swifter than the mind and everything that you do astonishing.

Your lustre dispels the darkness of ignorance, and enlightens the hearts of Mahatmans. Lord of the world, you are the greatest of the great; none can match you. For you are He that is this universe, material and spiritual.

Invincible One, your taintless Lord looses you upon a field of battle and shining like a thousand suns you dismember his enemies, the Asuras. You are terrible in battle, inexorable, yet, magnificent Chakra, I know that you forgive the sins of those that seek your forgiveness. He that is your Lord has decreed that you will only punish the evil.

I ask for your blessing, O Sudarshana Chakra. The blessing I ask is that you spare the life of this holy Durvasa, for that will bring great fortune to me and all my clan. It shall be a great kindness to me if you do this, a wonderful mercy.

If I have performed the rituals ordained by the Veda and the dharma of a king, if my kinsmen and my family have honoured the Sages of the earth as being incarnations of God, pardon Durvasa Muni. If Vishnu is pleased with me and mine, let this holy one be free from terror!'

The fulgurant Chakra grew calm to hear Ambareesha's hymn. It no longer flared at Durvasa, or threatened to make ashes of him. A tide of relief washed over the trembling Sage and, overwhelmed, he began to eulogise Ambareesha.

'Aho Anantadaasaanaam Mahatvam Drishtamamdyame; Kritaagaso Api Yad Raajan Mangalaani Sameehase…

Ah, today I have seen the greatness of those that serve the Infinite One! O King, you are being kind to me who wanted to harm you. Nothing is impossible for bhaktas like you that have won Hari himself, the guardian of his devotees. There is nothing that the good and the generous cannot renounce. For there is nothing they cannot have, who have conquered desire by having Him, whose very name purifies a man and the touch of whose feet makes him a sage.'

Durvasa had tears in his eyes; he could hardly believe what he had witnessed. Feelingly, he said, 'O King, your boundless mercy has blessed me today, for you have forgiven me, though I wanted to kill you, and you have saved my life!'

Ambareesha had not yet broken his fast; he had been waiting for Durvasa to return. Now he prostrated before the Rishi, embraced him affectionately and served him the most sumptuous feast Duvasa had ever eaten. Rare were those dishes the sovereign of the Earth laid before him, and indescribably delicious. The Sage, who had so narrowly escaped being incinerated by the Sudarshana Chakra, ate heartily, indeed as if this was the first, and even the last, meal he ever had.

Ambareesha's peerless cooks had made all the known delicacies in the six great flavours and Durvasa did them justice. Then he put an arm round the king's shoulders and said, 'Now you must let me serve you, great Ambareesha.'

Durvasa Muni did just that, though the king of dharma, king of bhakti was embarrassed no end. The Sage watched Ambareesha break his fast and cried, 'Ah, I am truly blessed today that I have eaten your food, Ambareesha greatest of bhaktas! I am blessed that I have seen you, heard you speak, that you have welcomed me and fed me, that you have touched me – all because you love and serve the Lord Narayana.

I tell you that the Apsaras of Devaloka shall sing of this day and what you have done, saving my life though I wanted to kill you! And the pauranikas of Bhumi and the Patalas shall immortalise you as well, matchless Ambareesha! Your glory will last forever and your fame, O most precious king.'

His heart now brimming with joy, Durvasa Muni went to Brahmaloka that none attain by mere karma, but only with grace. A year had passed since the Sage first fled from the Sudarshana Chakra. All that while, Ambareesha had waited for him to return – to feed him before he ate himself.

This year that he starved filled the king with intense devotion. He began to see, intimately, the hand of God in everything that had happened: the terror of Durvasa, the Muni's immense relief when he, Ambareesha, turned the Sudarshana away.

That king, the Rajarishi, evolved beyond what he had been before. He found a new and unshakeable courage within himself; he found the highest form of bhakti that exists, the devotion that makes an offering of one's every deed, why, of one's body, heart and being to God. He found that there was no greater joy than this condition. He knew that all the heavens (even Brahma's highest one), with their every joy and pleasure, were as mere hells when he compared them with bhakti for Vishnu.

Soon, Ambareesha handed his limitless kingdom down to his sons, all of them his equals in dharma, and he went away to the forest to become a hermit. He surrendered himself absolutely to Narayana, the soul of all beings, and he grew beyond the sway of Prakriti. Ambareesha became immortal by his bhakti.

Parikshit, he that meditates upon this legend of Ambareesha will himself become a bhakta of the Lord Krishna, and will find moksha and eternal bliss one day," said Suka Muni to the Pandava emperor.

THE LINE OF AMBAREESHA

"THE GREAT AMBAREESHA HAD THREE SONS, VIRUPA, KETUMAN AND Sambhu. Virupa's son was Prishadasva and his son was Rathitara. Rathitara could not father any children and his wife went to the Rishi Angiras to continue their line.

That Sage sired splendid princes upon her, radiant with Brahmic light. These belonged to the lines of both Rathitara and Angiras. Born to a kshatriya queen, they grew up owning the acme of qualities of both brahmana and kshatriya.

As for Ikshvaku, the renowned, he was born from Vaivaswata Manu's nose, when Surya Deva's son sneezed. Ikshvaku had a hundred sons, of whom three were the most noteworthy and powerful – Vikukshi, Nimi and Dandaka. These three ruled the middle kingdoms of the earth.

Of the rest, twenty-five became kings of the east, twenty-five others lords of the west, and the remaining twenty-two became monarchs of the north and the south.

Once, Ikshvaku undertook an Ashtakaasraddha. He called his son Vikukshi and said, 'Hurry, my prince, go to the jungle and bring me the flesh of animals that are considered appropriate to be sacrificed.'

That mighty kshatriya prince left straightaway for the jungle and he killed countless animals that he knew were fit to be offered at his father's sraddha in the names of their ancestors. He felt exhausted with all the hunting he had done and made himself a meal with the flesh of a rabbit that he had killed.

When he had eaten and rested a while, Vikukshi brought the carcasses of the beasts he had killed to his father. But when the dead animals were presented to their Kulaguru Vasishta, the Sage declared that their flesh was defiled since one of them had been eaten – they were leavings now.

When Ikshvaku learnt how Vikukshi had eaten the rabbit, he flew into a rage and banished his son from his kingdom. Then, heartbroken, Ikshvaku turned more and more to matters of the spirit. He sat day and night with the profound Vasishta, and he began to practise yoga rigorously. At last, Ikshvaku gave up his body in yoga; he dissolved it with yogic power and attained nirvana.

When his father died, Vikukshi returned to the kingdom and ruled. He now called himself Sasaada. His son was Indravaaha, also called Kakutstha and Puranjaya. Listen to how that king earned those names by what he did.

During one of the many wars between the Devas and the Asuras, the Devas were crushed and sought the help of Indravaaha to avenge them and win back their lost heaven. At Vishnu's behest, Indra himself became a massive bull and served as Raja Indravaaha's mount. Armed with great weapons and astras, and wearing magnificent mail, the kshatriya sat upon the hump, the kakut, of Indra the bull to face the Demons in battle.

It is told that Vishnu entered Indravaaha's body subtly to increase his prowess incalculably. Made mighty by the Parama Purusha, Indravaaha and the Devas attacked the city of the Asuras in the west. The Demons poured out of their gates in dark legions and a terrific battle began.

Shining like a sun upon that field, Indravaaha slew any Demon that dared face him. Arrows streamed like a river from his bow, like the flames of the apocalypse. The Asuras fell like torched locust swarms before him and they streamed into the realm of Yama, the Lord Death. The Demons could not stand before him and those left alive fled for their lives down to mysterious Patala, where serpentine Nagas and other beings and creatures of twilight dwell.

Since the king conquered the city of the Asuras and gave it to Indra, with all the wealth it contained, he was called Puranjaya. For riding Indra the bull, they named him Indravaaha, and since he sat like a star upon Indra's hump he became Kakutstha.

Indravaaha's son was Anenas and his son was Prithu. Prithu's son was Viswarandhi and his son Chandra. Chandra's son was Yuvanaswa, whose son was Saabasta, who built the great city of Saabasti.

Brihadaswa was Saabasta's son, and his son was Kuvalayaasvaka, who with an army of twenty-one thousands, comprising just his own offspring, slew the dreaded Asura Dhundhu. This he did to please the Rishi Utanka. Kuvalayaasvaka became renowned as Dhundhumaara. Most of his princes were consumed by the immense flames that the Demon spewed from his mouth before he died. Only three of Kuvalayaasvaka's sons survived – Dhridaasva, Kapilaasva and Bhadraasva.

Haryaasva was Dhridaasva's son and his son was Nikumbha. Nikumbha's son was Barhanaasva, who sired Krisaasva, who begot Senajit, whose son was Yuvanaasva. Yuvanaasva had no children, though he married a hundred wives. He went into the forest sadly, with all his queens, to perform tapasya. Having no sons had made him indifferent to his kingdom, to life itself.

However, he met some Rishis in the jungle and they helped him perform a yagna to Indra. One night, woken by a searing thirst, the king stumbled blindly into the yagnashala. He saw all the priests for his sacrifice asleep on the floor of the capacious hall. He saw some vessels of water and, seizing the first one, drank thirstily from it.

Yuvanaasva did not know that this was holy water, which the priests had consecrated by chanting mantras over it. When the brahmanas awoke, they found the empty water vessel and cried, 'Who did this? Someone drank all the water that was meant for the queens, so they would bear the king sons.'

When they learnt that Yuvanaasva himself had drunk the water, they realised the Lord himself must have sent down that thirst upon the king and now fate would take its course. The Rishis said to Yuvanaasva, 'Men's efforts count for nothing, only what God wills comes to pass.'

Yuvanaasva became pregnant after drinking that sacred water. He carried a child inside him until one day the right side of his belly burst and a fine prince was born, who would become a king of kings.

The child cried hungrily when he was born; but no mother had borne him and Yuvanaasva had no milk with which to feed him. The Rishis, in whose asrama the birth took place, were anxious about how they would feed the baby. Then Indra came down from his Swarga in glory and gave the little prince his thumb to suckle, saying, 'Don't cry, sweet child. *Maam dhaataa, drink from me!*'

The baby sucked avidly on Indra's thumb, which flowed amrita, the ambrosia of the Gods, for him. For what Indra said to quieten the little one, that prince was named Mandhata. Though his belly had burst, Yuvanaasva survived, miraculously. He lived a life of tapasya in the forest until the end of his days, when he found moksha.

Mandhata, born most curiously, suckled with the nectar of the Devas, grew into such a tremendous warrior and king that even the greatest Rakshasas like Ravana quailed before him. They dare not cross him and dharma reigned with Mandhata as emperor of the world. So mighty was he, Indra named him Trasddasyu – scourge of the evil.

Mandhata was a devout Vishnubhakta and by the Lord's grace he ruled the seven continents. He was a special kshatriya, a Rajarishi blessed naturally with the highest illumination, the knowledge of the Atman. Yet, he never ceased worshipping the Blue God, who lies upon the waters of eternity, who is the Soul of all existence and the embodiment of all the Gods, with numberless and lavish yagnas.

With these yagnas, the king adored the One that is every part of the sacrifice – all the sacrificial offerings and elements, the mantras, the rituals, the yagna, the yaajaka, the brahmana priests, dharma, the place and time of the sacrifice.

All the lands that lie between the horizons where the sun rises and sets were part of the empire of Mandhata, son of Yuvanaasva. Mandhata married Sasabindu's daughter Indumati and the royal couple had three sons – Purukutsa, Ambareesha and the unequalled Yogin Muchukunda. They had fifty daughters, all of whom were given to be the wives of the Rishi Saubhari. Would you hear about this unusual Sage, O Parikshit?"

And the king replied that, of course, he must.

Suka said, "Once this austere Sage was mortifying his body, holding his breath while he sat submerged under the Yamuna. While observing this austerity, the Rishi noticed the intense pleasure that a king of fish enjoyed mating with one of his queens. Saubhari, who had never known sexual union, was determined to experience that joy himself, the very sight of which awoke such unprecedented yearning in him.

He went straightaway to King Mandhata and asked for one of his daughters to be his wife. The king replied that he would arrange for a ceremony at which any of his daughters would be free to choose the Sage to be her husband.

Saubhari thought Mandhata was trying to deceive him, for which princess would choose a decrepit old Sage to be her husband? He decided to use his occult powers and transformed himself into a dashing young man, whom even the Apsaras of Devaloka could not resist.

When Saubhari was brought before the king's fifty daughters, all of them chose him to be their husband! They were so inflamed by the sight of the handsome seer that they began to fight over which of them would marry him. Each claimed how she was best suited to be his wife. Finally, Mandhata intervened and said that all fifty princesses could marry the Rishi, if he was agreeable.

Saubhari was a master of the Rig Veda and a man of vast power. With that power of his long tapasya, he created a marvellous sprawling home for himself and his wives. There, he sported with them amidst opulence and luxury that even their father, sovereign of the seven Dwipas, had not been able to offer them.

There were fifty palaces in the realm the Sage created with his thought, which no edifice on earth could rival. There were gardens that seemed to have fallen out of Swarga, food and drink that had never passed mortal lips, surely, and male and female attendants to be the guards and companions of the fifty. Saubhari gave his wives clothes that they had never dreamt could exist, and also unguents, perfumes, and ornaments.

Amidst delicate woods, where trees from Swarga grew and unearthly flowers, where Gandharva minstrels came as exotic birds and sang in the branches, where there were lakes so clear one could almost see one's soul reflected upon their water, and in the wondrous palaces, Saubhari made love to his fifty young wives with virility that the Devas scarcely possess! When Mandhata saw the magical splendour of his son-in-law's home in the forest, he gave up any vestige of pride that he might have had in his own wealth and kingdom.

But quickly, Saubhari discovered that he found no true joy in indulging himself extravagantly as he did with his lovely young wives. There was no peace in his heart. He found that desire, which had first led him into this householder's life, could never be satisfied, but only grew with being indulged: like a fire fed with ghee.

One day, Saubhari sat alone, thinking sadly how watching the fish mate in the Yamuna had led him into the spiritual degeneration in which he now found himself enmeshed. He realised that he had sacrificed priceless Brahmic glory for the worthless carnality he was steeped in, trapped in.

He said to himself, 'There is nothing so perilous as sexual desire for one who is a seeker after moksha. A seeker must never allow his senses to range unrestrained over lust. He must yoke them and his mind to the Lord, the Infinite One. If he seeks company, let it be only of the sage and the virtuous, of enlightened men. Let him never seek company to gratify his desire, his deadliest enemy.

Once I was a hermit and there was just myself I had to think of. Then I saw the fish mating and was tempted. I married and became fifty. The fifty begot children and grandchildren, attachment grew and I have become five thousand now! And instead of decreasing, my sorrows have grown five thousand times. I have become selfish and blind to the only thing worth living for, the only final reality that saves a man.'

A tide of renunciation rose up in his heart and Saubhari abandoned the fine realm he had created for his wives and walked away into the natural jungle, to become a hermit again. He left all the palaces and perfumed gardens, every luxury behind him and never looked back. By now, their husband had become their God, and his fifty wives followed him, also abandoning the opulent existence they had enjoyed, leaving behind their children and grandchildren.

Saubhari began a life of extreme penance, swiftly reducing himself to skin and bones. He offered the sacred fires that he had kept lit as a grihasta into the fire of the Atman. He offered the fire of the Atman into that of the Paramatman. His body took flame and subsided in fragrant ashes. Before that happened, his wives, who had watched him find moksha and its light and fire blaze forth from their lord, walked into those flaring flames and, united with their husband, set free, became ashes themselves."

THE LINE OF MANDHATA

PARIKSHIT WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE SONS OF GREAT MANDHATA and Suka said, "Mandhata's first son was Ambareesha. His grandfather Yuvanaasva adopted and raised him. This Ambareesha had a son, whom he named after his grandfather, and this younger Yuvanaasva's son was Harita. From the younger Yuvanaasva and Harita one line of the descendants of Mandhata sprang.

Mandhata's second son Purukutsa married a Naga princess who was offered to him by her brother serpents. Her name was Narmada and she begged him to go down to Rasatala to kill some marauding Gandharvas who were menacing that subterranean world where her clan once lived in peace. Imbued as he was with the power of Vishnu in his blood, Purukutsa went to the under-world and slew the Gandharvas.

The grateful Nagas blessed him – those that remembered or related his deed would never be bitten by any snake.

Purukutsa's son was Prasaddasyu, whose son was Anaranaya, who begot Haryasva, who sired Aruna, whose was Tribandhana's father. Tribandhana had a son whom he called Satyavrata after the great sovereign of yore who learnt the secrets of the Soul from the Golden Matsya upon the waters of the deluge.

The latterday Satyavrata became better known as Trisanku. Once he was possessed by an inexorable desire to rise into Swarga in his body. He asked his Kulaguru Vasishta and his sons to help him realise his extraordinary desire, for he felt God had placed it in his heart, so powerful was its hold over him.

Vasishta cursed him to be a nishada and he did indeed become an outcaste, that king of perfect dharma. He met Rishi Viswamitra in a jungle's heart and that Sage sacrificed all his own punya to send Trisanku into heaven in his mortal body. Up through the sky rose the king who had become a nishada, but Indra and the Devas cast him back down like a meteor.

As he fell, Trisanku cried, 'Save me, O Viswamitra!'

That Sage raised his arms and chanted a potent mantra. He set Trisanku up in the sky as a Deva himself, and Indra's equal. Viswamitra created another Swarga for Trisanku to rule. One can still see this king in the firmament, as a bright star surrounded by his own galaxy.

Trisanku's son was Harishchandra. Viswamitra and Vasishta had a heated disagreement over this king and they cursed each other to become birds. As birds, they fought a prolonged battle!

Harishchandra had no sons and Narada told him to worship Varuna, God of the oceans. Desperate as he was – for he had been taught that no man could enter heaven unless he has a son – the king swore to the Sea God, 'Bless me with a son and I shall offer him to you as a sacrifice.'

Varuna blessed him and, in time, a prince was born to Harishchandra and he named the child Rohita. Within hours of Rohita's birth, Varuna Deva arrived, shimmering in glory in Harishchandra's palace, and said, 'Now you have a son, give him to me as you swore.'

The king replied, 'A child is unclean for ten days after his birth and should not be offered as a sacrifice. Come back after ten days, I beg you, O Varuna, and you shall have my son.'

Varuna came back in ten days and asked for the prince.

Harishchandra now said, 'Only when he has his teeth will he be fit to be sacrificed, O God of the deeps.'

In some weeks, Rohita cut his milk teeth and Varuna came again, glassy waves his hair, and lambent, and said, 'Now he has his teeth. Let me have him.'

'A yagnapasu's first teeth must fall out,' said the king now, 'and his permanent teeth grow.'

In some years, Varuna, who is as patient as his seas are fathomless, came again, 'Now your son has his permanent teeth. Give him to me.'

Harishchandra replied, 'He is a kshatriya, this sacrificial animal. He must know the arts of war before he is fully a kshatriya. You must not sacrifice an ungrown beast.'

Loving and growing more attached to his son day by day, the king postponed the sacrifice every time Varuna came to him. One day, when the boy was a youth, his father told him about Varuna and how Rohita's life had been pledged to the Deva. Harishchandra said, 'The God of waves comes to me like a collector of taxes and each time I put him off to save your life. But I fear this cannot go on much longer. He will grow angry and kill both of us. My child, I will have to keep my word and sacrifice you to him soon.'

Panic-stricken, Rohita took just his bow and ran away from his father's palace into the jungle. When Varuna heard, he became furious and visited Harishchandra with dropsy, a fatal imbalance of the bodily fluids. When Rohita learnt that his father lay dying, he set out for the city to sacrifice himself to save the king's life.

But Indra came to him on his way as an aged brahmana, and said to him, 'If you visit all the most sacred tirthas in the land of Bharata your father will become well again.'

Rohita set out on that pilgrimage and Harishchandra did indeed recover. Rohita continued living in the forest, but in a year Varuna's sickness returned to the king and he lay dying again. Rohita set out once more to give up his life for his father. Indra came to him again as the old and mysterious brahmana and advised him to undertake another tirthayatra.

Again, Harishchandra recovered miraculously. For five years this cycle was repeated – the king's malady, his son's pilgrimage and the father's recovery for a year, then again, the return of the sickness. But each time, Harishchandra's recovery was less complete and Rohita realised he would have to sacrifice himself to keep his father's solemn word given to Varuna.

In the sixth year, when he heard his father lay dying again, he set out for his home. On the way, he came upon a brahmana family in the forest – Ajigartha, his wife and three sons. Rohita asked the brahmana for one of his sons in return for some cows and some gold. Ajigarta said his eldest son was as dear to him as life and he could not part with the boy. His wife said the same about the youngest.

Rohita acquired the middle youth Sunashepa, who was devastated that his parents would sell him for some cows and some gold. Rohita brought the young man to his father to become the sacrificial beast in his place and the heartbroken youth came willingly to die, for he said it was no use living when his own mother and father had sold him. Sunashepa was sacrificed to Varuna and Harishchandra recovered from his dropsy.

Viswamitra was the hota priest, Jamadagni was the adhvaryu, Vasishta was the brahma priest, and Agastya the Sama chanter. Indra gave Harischandra a golden chariot. Viswamitra saved the boy Sunashepa's life, but that is another story, which I will tell you later as part of the legend of Viswamitra and his sons.

Viswamitra was pleased with the king and his queen and taught them the way of the Atman, in the profound instruction of silence – the path to liberation. Harishchandra dissolved the body-identified mind in the element of earth; earth he subsumed into its cause, water. Water was absorbed in fire, fire in air, air in the sky, sky in the Atman, Atman in Mahatattva. He united himself with that Universal Consciousness, conceiving of it as his own self.

Illumination flooded him in infinite tide, washing away the final dregs of ignorance and illusion. Knowledge filled him; he became perfect knowledge. Then, that too dissolved and what was left was just immutable bliss, the inmost and true nature of the Atman, ineffable," said Suka mildly.

THE LEGEND OF SAGARA

SUKA DEVA CONTINUED, "ROHITA'S SON WAS HARITA AND HIS SON Champa. Champa built the city of Champapuri. His son was Sudeva and Sudeva's son, Vijaya. Vijaya's son was Bharuka, who begot Vrika, whose son was Baahuka.

Baahuka was vanquished by his enemies and fled to the forest with his queen. There he died of being heartbroken and his wife wanted to commit sati upon his pyre. The Rishi Aurva, near whose asrama they lived, stopped her, saying that she was pregnant with the only male heir to the royal line.

When the other wives of Baahuka heard that she was with child, they poisoned her food. Yet, her infant survived and he was born stronger for having imbibed the poison while in his mother's womb. In time, with God's grace upon him, he regained his father's kingdom and became the legendary monarch Sagara, which meant 'he that was born with poison'.

Sagara's wild sons dug up the ocean, which was then known as Saagara. Sagara conquered the Taalajanghas, the Yavanas, Sakas, Haihayas and Barbaras. His Guru Aurva told him to spare their lives, though, and he did. But he humiliated them, shaving some of their heads in public, the faces of others, half the heads or faces of still others. He paraded them naked or clad in just kowpinams, penis sheaths, through his streets.

Aurva had Sagara perform an Aswamedha yagna, a horse sacrifice to worship the Supreme God, of whom the Veda and the Devas are but amsas, who had been his support and restored the great kingdom of his fathers to him. Indra, who always tests the endeavours of the greatest kings, stole Sagara's sacrificial stallion, while it was grazing in the field.

Sagara had two queens, Kesini and Sumati. Sumati had a thousand sons, proud and virile kshatriyas of boundless strength. They flared away in quest of their father's sacrificial horse. They searched the surface of the world and found no horse. Then they furrowed the earth in deep trenches, tearing up whole forests, razing everything in their path, desecrating the spirits of the earth. Next, they dove into darkling Patala, the under-worlds.

At last they came to a cave in the northeastern realms of the nether world, and saw Sagara's horse tethered to a stake beside the Rishi Kapila Vasudeva, who sat with his eyes shut, lost in samadhi.

'Horse thief!' cried Sumati's violent and foolish princes and rushed at the meditating Sage. The evil in their own bodies became a great fire when it approached Kapila's serene purity and all the thousand were ashes.

There are those that say that Kapila himself burned up Sumati's sons in wrath. But the truth is that he was beyond anger, which is tamasic; he was a perfectly sattvic being. Kapila saw all creation as being part of himself, and made no difference between a friend or an enemy. He was one with Brahman, that Sage who founded the Samkhya Yoga that is a ship in which men easily cross the ocean of samsara, where death rules and sports with jivas caught in delusion and ignorance.

When Sumati's thousand sons did not return, it fell to the offspring of Sagara's second wife Kesini to find the king's horse for his incomplete Aswamedha yagna. Queen Kesini had borne just one son, an apparently evil prince called Asamanjasa. This prince was a great yogi in his last birth, but had fallen prey to a mysterious and powerful attachment, which caused his spirit to devolve.

He remembered that previous birth clearly, and to avoid becoming attached again, especially to avoid becoming a king, he pretended to be demented, and even to be the worst kind of pervert. Since his earliest days, he behaved obscenely in the presence of his parents and family, in ways that revolted them.

His father prayed that his son would mend, for wasn't he the Yuvaraja, the heir apparent? The king had Asamanjasa married, but to no avail – the prince continued his mad behaviour. Finally, Asamanjasa was caught drowning some young children that were playing on the banks of the Sarayu in the river. His father banished him. As the prince left the great city, he revived the dead children with his yogic powers and went into the forest, never looking back. They say he found moksha.

The people of the city were wonderstruck to see their children return safely, as if after a long sleep, and the king Sagara now realised who his son was. He found some consolation. Before Asamanjasa's final departure from the city, he sired a son on his young wife, a brilliant prince whom they named Amshuman. When Sumati's wild sons did not return from their quest for Sagara's sacrificial horse, his grandfather sent Amshuman forth to find the beast.

He rode the subterranean path his uncles had made until he arrived at a mound of ashes, deep in Patala, beside which his grandsire's Aswamedha stallion stood serenely cropping some fine grass. Amshuman also saw that a radiant Sage sat in deep dhyana in that cavern. His body shone with his tapasya. Unlike his unrestrained uncles, the calm Amshuman stood before Kapila Muni, the Avatara, with folded hands, not venturing to disturb his meditation.

Amshuman knew who the awesome one before him was and softly hymned him with a song of praise that welled spontaneously in his heart. '*Na Pashyati Tvaam Paramatmanojana, Na Budhyate Adyaapi Samadhiyuktibhi. Kutopare Tasya Manah Shareera Adheevisargashrishta vayamaprakaasha…*

Not the Paramatman himself has been able to fathom you, though he has tried with meditation and reason. How then can these mortals, especially ignorants like me, born of the mind, body and intellect of the Paramatman, hope to know you?

Fascinated by your maya, all the living are bound by the three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas. Our minds reach outside ourselves and do not see you within us, the Antaryamin. When we are awake, we see only the world of appearances that the senses show us; when we sleep, we know only the darkness of ignorance.

How can the ignorant fathom you, who are Divine Consciousness distilled, whom only Rishis like Sanatana have experienced – they who have transcended maya, and come to Yoga, to communion. In truth, you are formless and nameless, but you have assumed this corporeal appearance to enlighten the lost and those that seek you.

Obeisance to You, most ancient One! Entangled in your maya, men begin to believe in the permanence of their homes, families, and their wealth. I, too, was like that. But now I see you before me and just seeing you my soul awakens and ignorance clears from my mind like shreds of night before the rising sun! Marvellous vision and peace seize my spirit.'

Kapila heard the fervour in the prince's voice and blessed him in his heart. He opened his eyes and spoke to the young kshatriya who stood so reverently before him, hands still folded. 'Vatsa, dear prince, Indra brought your grandfather's horse and left him here. You may take the animal back for the king's Aswamedha yagna.'

Amshuman asked humbly, 'And my uncles, Holy One?'

'They violated the Earth and her spirits. Their own sins made them ashes. Only the waters of the Ganga can purify them.'

The prince walked round Kapila in pradakshina, then prostrated before the awesome Sage and had his blessing. He then returned with the sacrificial horse and helped Sagara complete his yagna.

When this was finally accomplished, after the long wait and the loss of his sons, Sagara's mind turned away from everything worldly, away from desire and the bondage that springs from desire. His Guru, the Rishi Aurva, told him to entrust the kingdom to his grandson Amshuman. Then on, the king lived the life of an ascetic and attained moksha."

AMSHUMAN TO KHATVAANGA

SUKA CONTINUED SLOWLY, "FOR MANY YEARS, AMSHUMAN PERFORMED tapasya to fetch the holy Ganga, who in those days flowed only through Devaloka, down to Bhumi to wash the ashes of his ancestors. But great were the sins of the sons of Sagara and great was their shadow that fell over the king, and Amshuman died without achieving his purpose.

Amshuman's son was Dilipa, and he inherited the task that his father failed to accomplish. The shadow of the sins of the Sagaraputras grew darker and heavier, day by day, upon their royal house. Dilipa also failed to invoke the holy Ganga and died.

Dilipa's son was Bhageeratha. By now the curse of the sons of Sagara, whose spirits languished in Patala, unredeemed, was so powerful upon their royal line that Bhageeratha could not father any children. Dread fell over the kingdom and of his line, Bhageeratha was the first to realise that everything would be destroyed unless he brought the Ganga down to save his dead ancestors' souls. Bhageeratha entrusted the kingdom to some trusted ministers and went away to the Himalayas, to sit in tapasya, to fetch the Ganga to him.

Thus committing himself entirely, Bhageeratha sat a hundred years in intense penance. Ganga the Goddess appeared before him in light.

Bhageeratha said, 'Mother only you can save my ancestors; until you do so their curse remains upon my line, the House of Vaisvaswata Manu, son of Surya Deva.'

Ganga replied, 'Who will bear the weight of my descent if I fall down into the Earth? If no one does, Bhumi will shatter into dust and I will plunge into Rasatala and be lost. Moreover, O King, I know that if I flow upon the Earth, men will come to wash their sins in me, and how will I contain all that agony? Where will I rid myself of their combined darkness?'

Bhageeratha felt the Lord inspire his heart, and he answered, 'Holy men, pure Rishis absorbed in the Brahman, men that can cleanse all this Bhumi, shall come to you as pilgrims. They will take the sins from your waters when they bathe in you. Have no fear O Devi, for Vishnu himself dwells in such men. Also, you will flow into the ocean and Varuna Deva shall absorb your sins, as well.'

Ganga asked, 'But what of my fall? Who will break that?' She was vain with all the reverence she received from the Devas in Swarga. 'Who is there in this world great enough to bear my fall?'

Again, an inner voice spoke in Bhageeratha's heart and whispered a name to him. He said with certainty, 'The Lord Rudra, in whom all the galaxies dwell as a piece of cloth does in its warp and woof. Siva, who is the inmost being of all, will break your descent.'

Ganga said that as soon as Rudra was ready to receive her, she would flow down the stars into the world, for Bhageeratha had moved her with his unflinching tapasya. Then she vanished.

Now Bhageeratha began another penance to win Siva's favour, for, truly, who else could bear the weight of Ganga when she came down the Milky Way. Of all the Gods, Rudra is the most easily pleased and before long, he appeared in a vision to Bhageeratha.

Siva said, 'O devout King, you should not have to perform so severe a penance for a cause as just as yours. I will bear Ganga's descent upon my head.'

So the river of heaven fell down the stars as an immense crystal cataract. She washed Hari's feet as she fell and she fell upon the Himalaya, where Bhageeratha still sat in dhyana, waiting for her. When he saw her hurtling down the path of the stars, he quailed: could even Rudra bear the weight of the ocean of the firmament that now fell like the Pralaya upon the earth? Surely, he had destroyed the earth by his foolish penance.

Then, in a wink, a great bright figure loomed beside the terrified king. The river of heaven fell upon its head with a crash like the thunder in the universe before the apocalypse. Bhageeratha hardly dared watch, for he was certain the end of the brilliant God and the world had arrived. Instead, it was the sea of the sky that vanished in a moment for Rudra absorbed her at the base of a single strand of his matted hair, his jata!

She raged and stormed and rose in great tides, but Siva only smiled. Then, her pride was broken and he released her drop by drop along that strand of his hair to form a sacred lake of water drops upon the mountain – the Bindusaras. She flowed again from that lake, purifying everything she touched on her way, as now Bhageeratha led her in his chariot to the place where a tunnel led into Patala, where his ancestors' ashes lay in bondage still.

In a silver cascade, the Ganga fell upon the mound of ashes and Sagara's thousand sons rose in a thousand Spirit flames. Their hands folded to the holy river, blessing Bhageeratha with all their hearts, all their violent crimes forgiven them at last, their rose straight into Swarga.

Parikshit, when dead men find salvation because their ashes are drenched by the waters of the Ganga, how much more shall those who worship her while they live find her grace. And there is small wonder in this, because she flowed originally from the lotus feet of Hari Narayana, from the place on high that is known as Vishnupaada. Countless are the Rishis who, through the chasmic ages, have found moksha by meditating upon those most sacred feet. By his grace, all of them accomplished the well nigh impossible goal of dispelling the illusion of the jiva identifying itself with the body, which is caused by the gunas. They found Yoga, union with Mahavishnu, God of Gods.

Bhageeratha's son was Sruta and Sruta's son, Naabha. Naabha begot Sindhudweepa, who sired Ayutaayus, whose son was the famous Nala's friend Rituparna. It was from Rituparna that Nala learnt the secret art of winning at dice, and to return the favour he taught Rituparna the akshahridaya, which is the hermetic science of mastering and tending to horses.

Rituparna's son was Sarvakaama, and his son was Sudaasa. Sudaasa's son was Saudasa, and he was also called Mitrasaha. Mitrasaha's wife was Madayanti. He was also known by another name – Kalmaashaangri. But Vasishta Muni cursed Mitrasaha and he became a rakshasa. He was a sinner and had no sons."

Parikshit asked, "Was Mitrasaha not a noble kshatriya that Vasishta cursed him. What was the truth of that? Or is it a secret that you cannot divulge?"

Suka said, "Once, Mitrasaha went to hunt in the jungle. He encountered two rakshasas. He killed one, but his brother escaped the king. The demon fled through the forest, determined that he would have revenge on Mitrasaha one day.

As you know, some rakshasas are masters of the occult arts of maya, and can assume any form they like. This one came to the king's palace in the guise of a human, and found employment in the palace kitchen as a cook. One day, when Vasishta, the Kulaguru of the Ikshvakus, was hungry, the demon brought the Rishi human flesh to eat.

Flying into a rage, because he knew at once what was on his plate, he held Mitrsaha responsible for the outrage and cursed him to become a rakshasa. Mitrsaha fell at his Guru's feet and pleaded his innocence. Vasishta saw that the king did not lie and that a rakshasa had done this thing. He pronounced that his curse would last for only twelve years.

But the king was furious that he should be cursed at all and he took up some holy water in his palm to curse his master back. He pronounced a mantra for a curse, but his queen Madayanti stopped him from sprinkling the water over Vasishta. But the water was now charged with a potent curse, and where could Mitrasaha be rid of it? For the water would grievously harm any place or being on which it landed. The king poured the cursed water over his own feet.

When Mitrasaha became a rakshasa, he had discoloured feet, and that is why he was also called Kalmaashaangri. As he roamed the forest as a rakshasa, one day he came upon a brahmana couple making love. Hungry as he was, Mitrasaha seized the man to eat him.

But the woman cried, 'You are not really a rakshasa, but a noble kshatriya of the House of Ikshvaku! You must not do this vile thing, for my husband's desire is not yet fulfilled and I have no children. O King, it is in this body that humans attain their desires; if you destroy the body you frustrate those desires and the jiva's very evolution.

My husband is a learned and virtuous Rishi, who lives an austere life. He lives to worship Vishnu. He is a Brahmarishi and a Rajarishi; you must never kill him. It is like parricide, like murdering a sacred cow, far worse. O Mitrasaha, if you are still determined to devour my husband, kill and eat me first because I cannot live for a moment without him!'

But Mitrasaha was a rakshasa now, with the nature and the lusts of a rakshasa. He only growled to listen to the woman's entreaty and ate her husband as a tiger would a cow. The woman screamed her curse at him, 'You have murdered my husband when he was aroused, you shall die if you ever have intercourse with a woman!'

She then built a pyre for herself and committed sati upon it with her husband's bones that Mitrasaha had left after sucking the marrow from them.

Twelve years of being a rakshasa passed and one morning Mitrasaha awoke as from a long nightmare and found he was a human being again. He returned to his city and his palace. He told his good queen Madayanti all that had transpired with him during those twelve years. Came night and Mitrasaha blazed up in desire for his wife. Madayanti reminded him of the brahmana woman's curse and the king withdrew sadly, knowing that he could never enjoy a woman again.

Yet the royal line must continue; the House of the Sun must have an heir. In accordance with ancient custom, Mitrasaha went to Vasishta and asked him to sire a son upon his queen Madayanti. Vasishta agreed and Madayanti conceived after the Rishi spent a night with her.

It is told, O Parikshit, that the queen carried her child inside her not for nine months but seven years, until finally Vasishta incised her belly with a stone knife and delivered her prince, his son. And that was why that child was named Asmaka.

Asmaka's son was Moolaka. When Vishnu's brahmana Avatara, Parasurama Bhargava, let flow the blood of the kshatriya across the length and breadth of Bharatavarsha, in wrath that one of them had slain his father, Moolaka hid among the women of his harem. Disguised as a woman, he alone escaped with his life while Parasurama slew the rest of the very race of kshatriyas.

When the Bhargava's fury abated and he retired to Mount Mahendra to sit in tapasya to atone for his sins of shedding the blood of anointed kings, Moolaka regenerated the race of the warrior kings, the kshatriyas. Moolaka's son was Dasaratha, and Dasaratha begot Aidavida. Aidavida's son was Viswasaha, who sired the invincible Khatvaanga.

Khatvaanga was so mighty that the Devas sought his help to fight a war against the Asuras of his day. Khatvaanga slaughtered every Demon in the enemy army, but then the Devas told him that he had just a muhurta to live, a bare hour and a half. He flew back to his city and tried to concentrate his mind upon the Lord in his final moments.

Thus did the great Khatvaanga meditate: 'The God of my clan is the Rishisangha, the community of Sages, and they are more precious to me than my life, my breath. Not my wife or my children, not my kingdoms or all my wealth is as dear to me as the holy ones.

Since I was a boy, my mind was never drawn to temptation or sought pleasure from evil. Always, I have thought of only the Lord as being real. The Devas who rule the three worlds offered me any boon I wanted. I did not accept the offer because my mind was intent upon just God.

He dwells within us all, yet even the Devas do not understand the Atman. They do not see that only the Atman invests any outward object or person with preciousness. When the Gods are deluded, what to say of the rest?

I renounce every object of the senses, which God's maya creates like palaces in the sky, mirages. I seek my refuge in the Creator; I seek Vishnu himself.'

Transmuting his dhyana, this single thought, into reality, Khatavaanga relinquished his attachments and his ignorance and plunged the roots of his mind, his being, into his soul, the infinitely blissful Atman. That was the Brahman, subtler than his mind could grasp – so his mind dissolved in it – and absolutely real.

The ignorant think of Him, the final Reality, as not existing because they cannot know him with their senses. He is the One the Bhagavatas call Vasudeva," said Suka.

RAMA AVATARA

SRI SUKA SAID, "DEERGHABAAHU WAS KHATVAANGA'S SON. Deerghabahu's son was the legendary Raghu, whose son was Aja, who begot the noble Dasaratha. The Devas asked Vishnu, the Blue Lord Narayana, to be born on earth to kill a great Rakshasa, who had a boon of invincibility from Brahma against all the divine and demonic races.

Vishnu incarnated himself in amsa as four Kshatriya princes: the four sons of Dasaratha – Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna, in order to turn back a tide of evil that was sweeping the world. The eldest, Rama, was the Maryada Purushottaman, the man of perfect honour. Surely, O King, you have heard the legend of Rama many times from the Rishis in your court, and in detail – Rama who renounced a kingdom to keep his father's word.

Rama's feet were so soft that they could hardly stand his wife's delicate touch, yet he walked down forest paths that Lakshmana and Surgiva cleared for him. He terrified Varuna Deva, Lord of the ocean, into providing a calm channel through his waves upon which Rama's monkey army built a bridge to make the crossing into Lanka where Ravana the Rakshasa held Rama's wife Sita captive.

Rama blazed like a forest fire upon that island and consumed Ravana and his demons. Ah, may that same Rama be our sanctuary!" Suka's face was bright as he spoke of Dasaratha's son.

That greatest Pauranika's eyes were full of light as he continued, "When he was just a youth, a stripling, he routed the rakshasas Mareecha and Subahu in the forest, while Lakshmana looked on.

Later, in a sabha of great Rishis, he snapped Siva's bow as easily as a tusker does a stick of cane – the bow which needed three hundred mighty warriors to wheel it into that assembly. Thus, he married Janaka's daughter Sita in Mithila: she who was the Devi Lakshmi herself come down to be Rama's wife; she was as beautiful as he was handsome, as virtuous, as pure and perfect as him.

As they were returning to Ayodhya after the wedding, Parasurama confronted Rama, who humbled the Bhargava in a fierce trial of wills. Parasurama, the Avatara, had once decimated the very race of kshatriyas in twenty-one savage campaigns. Now he went back to his tapasya upon Mahendra, never to come down again, for he knew that one greater than him had been born, to rid the earth of evil.

Back in Ayodhya, Dasaratha wanted to crown Rama the Yuvaraja, and give the kingdom into his able hands. But his third wife Kaikeyi held the aging king to his word given to her many years ago, when she had once saved his life. She demanded that Rama be banished for fourteen years and that her own son Bharata be crowned Yuvaraja and then king.

Dasaratha begged Rama to disobey him and take the kingdom for himself by force, and no one in heaven or earth would object. But Rama insisted upon cleaving to dharma and gladly went into exile, with Sita and Lakshmana who would not stay behind. Rama clearly felt destiny calling him, though then he had never heard the name of Ravana of Lanka, whose path was to cross his own inexorably.

They say that Rama renounced his kingdom, his family, all the wealth and luxury he had grown amidst, his friends: as naturally and joyfully as a yogi does his body! Ah, may Rama's grace and his protection always be with us.

In the jungle, Ravana's sister the Rakshasi Surpanaka was attracted to Rama and tried to kill Sita to have him for herself. Rama and Lakshmana cut off her ears and nose and she went screeching through the jungle to her cousin Khara, king of the rakshasas of that forest. Khara came for revenge with an army of fourteen thousand demons, with his horrible brothers Dushana and Trisiras. Rama despatched that formidable force single-handedly, even as if they were children before him.

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita went from forest to forest, meeting all the Rishis that inhabited those vanas, and taking the holy ones' blessings. The kshatriya brothers slew all the rakshasas that lived in those jungles, preying on the hermits. Far away, upon his ocean isle, Ravana, Lord of all the rakshasas, heard about the slaying of Khara and his fourteen thousand.

Surpanaka came to him, disfigured, and she told Ravana about the beauty of Sita – beauty that he must see to believe. Artfully, Ravana's sister described the human princess and Ravana was smitten. He sent his uncle Mareecha, who dwelt as a hermit in the forest, as a wondrous golden deer, to draw Rama and Lakshmana away from the little asrama in which the brothers and Sita lived.

Sita was bewitched by the golden stag that shone like treasure. She begged Rama to capture it for her, to be her companion. Rama chased the golden deer through the jungle and it led him far from their little hut. Rama grew certain that the deer was none other that Mareecha, whom he had once shot a thousand yojanas through the sky with the manavastra.

Rama loosed a deadly arrow at the golden deer and killed it. Mareecha turned back into his natural, fanged and clawed, form. As he died, he gave a mortal cry in Rama's voice. Sita now sent Lakshmana, whom Rama had left behind to guard her, after that cry. His protests that no demon could harm Rama fell on deaf ears. She accused him of wanting her for himself, of being a traitor to his brother. Lakshmana could not bear this and went after Rama.

Ravana was hiding in the jungle and he seized Sita and carried her away as a wolf does a lamb. Rama and Lakshmana returned to their hermitage to find Sita gone. Grief-stricken, Rama wandered through the forest in search of his love, with the faithful Lakshmana at his side.

Meanwhile, the great eagle Jatayu, who had become their companion in the wilderness, had challenged Ravana as he bore Sita away through the air towards Lanka. After a bitter duel, Ravana cut off the aged Jatayu's wings and left him to die. Rama and Lakshmana found Jatayu in his final moments and he told them who had abducted Sita, before he breathed his last: in deep peace, for he died in Rama's arms.

After cremating Jatayu, the brothers set off through the forest again on their quest for Sita. They slew the strange one-eyed demon Kabandha, who turned into a Gandharva when he died. He was indeed one of the celestial minstrels who had been cursed to be a legless demon with long arms, until Rama the Avatara liberated him. Before he flew off into the sky, Kabandha told them to seek out Sugriva, the vanara king, who would help them find Sita.

Rama and Lakshmana found Sugriva on the hill called Prasravana and the human prince and the monkey king in exile swore friendship by the sacred fire. Rama killed Sugriva's mighty brother Vali, who had exiled Sugriva and hunted him, and the Incarnation restored his monkey kingdom to Sugriva.

In return, Sugriva sent forth his agile people in swarming legions across the earth to discover where Sita was. His great friend and minister Hanuman, son of Vayu the Wind, finally found her on Ravana's island, Lanka. Taking an army of Sugriva's vanaras with him, Rama marched to the southern shore. The ocean stretched before them, apparently uncrossable, and Lanka lay beyond the horizon.

Rama glared at the sea, his eyes blazing like the fire at the end of time. In a moment, the rolling waves subsided and the ocean grew calm as a mirror. The terrified Varuna Deva emerged from crystal waves, his wives and many marine beings around him. He came ashore, a great pearl of a God, wavelets his hair, massive corals his ornaments, and prostrated before Rama. He brought rare and wonderful treasures as gifts for the prince.

Varuna said, '*Na Tvaam Vayam Jadadhiyo Nu Vidaam Bhuman Kutastham AadiPurusham Jagataamdheesham. YatSattvatah Suraganaa Rajasah Prajeshaa Manyoshva Bhutapatayah Sa Bhavaan Guneshah...*

All Mighty One, being dull-witted, we have small understanding of you, omnipotent, undecaying One that control the universe. We know a little of *you – that you control Prakriti and its three gunas sattva, rajas and tamas, from which the Devas, the Prajapatis and the Bhuta lords are born.*

Kshatriya, cross my waters freely, kill the Devil Ravana (born from Visravas' dirt), who makes the worlds tremble and shed tears, and rescue your Sita. Build a bridge across my waves, Rama, which will spread your fame everywhere, so the conquerors of the earth that see it will sing paeans of you.'

Rama, Lakshmana and the monkeys built that bridge with trees and great crags that they tore from Mount Mahendra and carried into the sea grown still as a lake. The vanara army crossed over into Lanka, with Ravana's brother Vibheeshana, who had sought refuge against his evil brother with Rama, Sugriva, Neela, Jambavan, Hanuman and countless other great monkeys. Hanuman, you will recall, had already been in Lanka and set fire to large portions of it.

The vanara army besieged Ravana's exquisite city and it soon resembled a shallow lake ravaged by a herd of wild elephants. Its numerous pleasure gardens were ruined; its granaries and treasuries, its turrets, temples, its commodious courts, flagstaffs, highways and golden domes were quickly all in the hands of the monkeys. The doughty jungle warriors wrecked these without favour!

Ravana sent his mightiest demon commanders into battle, one after the other – warriors who had helped him conquer the three worlds, rakshasas at whose very names the worlds trembled. Nikumbha came to war, Kumbha of the great belly, Dhoomraaksha, Durmukha the hideous, Suraanta the dark, scourge of the Devas, Naraantaka from hell, Ravana's own son the indomitable Indrajit, said by many to be a greater warrior than his father.

His Senapati Prahasta came to fight, Atikaaya, Vikampana and his stupendous brother Kumbhakarna, who was the most massive Rakshasa ever created. Rama, Lakshmana, Sugriva, Hanuman, Gandhamaada the fragrant monkey, Neela son of Viswakarma, Jambavaan king of bears, Panasa, dead Vali's powerful son Angada and countless other vanara chieftains, many of them sons of Devas, faced the rakshasa army that no force had ever resisted before.

The demons were armed with swords, tridents, bows and arrows, lances and other occult astras of serpentine potency and darkness. They fought with maya, fell sorcery. They fought from horseback, from elephants and chariots. But the legions of the jungle, fighting with just treetrunks they uprooted, with large rocks and sometimes peaks they tore from nearby mountains with the strength of their Deva fathers, were proof against the demons. For they fought with Rama the Avatara at their head and they fought for dharma to quell the monstrous evil that had taken root in their distant jungles as well. They fought the ancient battle, which has been fought on so many worlds throughout the ages of the galaxies, and they prevailed.

The jungle army prevailed because Ravana had dared lay his vile hands upon the pure Sita, dared abduct her; and she was the Goddess of fortune, Lakshmi Devi herself. Fortune now deserted Ravana of Lanka and his people.

Finally, when his legions were desiccated, Ravana, wearing robes of black silk, emerged from his palace and flew at Rama. Indra sent down his chariot from Devaloka, with Matali his sarathy, and now Rama rode that chariot.

In a God's voice, Rama roared at the Rakshasa, 'Like a thieving dog you stole my wife from me. Now prepare to pay the price for what you did.'

Rama shot a Brahmastra into the Demon's heart and he fell spitting blood, as a soul does from heaven when his punya is exhausted. The world held its breath; it heaved a great sigh, both of wonder and relief, that, at last, the invincible Demon had fallen.

Ravana lay like a great fire extinguished outside the gates of Lanka, and now hundreds of women streamed out of the city. The rakshasis came tearing their hair, gnashing their teeth and wailing aloud that their men were slain by Lakshmana's arrow storms. Before all the others, came Ravana's queen Mandodari.

Like all the rest, she fell across the bloody corpse of her husband, beat her breast, and sobbed. Some women clasped their husbands, others their dead fathers and brothers. A hundred of the most exquisite women from all the races of the three worlds gathered around just Ravana's corpse, for they were all his mistresses.

One woman cried, 'Ravana, terror of the worlds, what shall Lanka's fate be that you are dead? Seeing your body, lifeless, half our lives have left us, too. Ah, we are beset by enemies and we have no one left to protect us.'

Another said in a hushed voice, 'O mighty Ravana, you let lust rule your heart and did not see the power of Sita's spirit, or her glory! That is what killed you.'

Yet another woman wept, 'Not just we but Lanka has been widowed. Oh Ravana, your mighty body is food for vultures and your soul plunges towards the tortures of hell!'

Now Rama told Vibheeshana to perform the rituals for the dead, to offer tarpana for their souls on their final journeys, according to the scriptures. Finally, Rama came to Sita, who still sat pining for him, as she had for a year, under a shimshupa tree in Ravana's asokavana. She was skin and bones, and as wan as one from whose heart all hope has gone.

At the sight of Rama, her face lit up like a sun rising; her very body seemed to bloom in joy!

Rama crowned Vibheeshana king of Lanka and the rakshasas. He blessed the righteous demon to a life that would last until the end of the Kalpa. With Lakshmana, Sita, Sugriva, Vibheeshana himself, Hanuman and all the vanaras that had made the crossing into Lanka, the Avatara rode the Pushpaka Vimana, which Ravana had once taken from his half-brother Kubera.

The fourteen years of his exile ended, and his great mission to kill Ravana accomplished, Rama flew back to Ayodhya in the magic ship of the sky. The Devas, whom Ravana had tyrannised for an epoch, poured down celebrant, worshipful rains of unearthly flowers on Rama. Indra and his people, the Gandharvas and Apsaras of heaven sang the praises of the Avatara from the sky, until he arrived in the city of his fathers.

Here he found his brother Bharata, who had ruled Ayodhya in his absence (but in Rama's name), living outside the city in Nandigrama. He lived a hermit's life because his brother was in exile and ate only barley cooked in cow's urine. Bharata wore valkala, tree-bark just as Rama did, he wore his hair in jata and slept on a stone floor.

Hanuman first flew to Bharata to tell him of Rama's return and saw that prince's face light up in joy to equal Sita's when she saw Rama in Lanka. Bharata came with all the Sages, ministers and the people of Ayodhya to receive Rama. He came with musicians and dancers, and a crowd ecstatic at the return of their precious prince.

Bharata bore Rama's sandals, which he took from him when his brother was first banished, upon his head. He had set these sandals on the golden throne of Ayodhya and always said that they ruled the kingdom. He used to speak to them incessantly, looking to them for inspiration, and he had been an exemplary king.

Bharata came to meet Rama with a host of brahmanas, all masters, who chanted auspicious hymns from the Veda. He came with a sea of gold-edged flags waving in welcome, with a complement of royal gold-inlaid chariots, their flagstaffs made of solid gold, and yoked to the finest horses in Ayodhya. Guardsmen in gold embroidered livery marched with Bharata, troupes of musicians and dancing girls and a host of palace servitors.

Leaving the thronging crowd, all Ayodhya had turned out to welcome back its crown prince, Bharata came up alone to Rama as he alighted from the mystic Pushpaka Vimana. With a cry of complete rapture, Bharata prostrated at his elder brother's feet and set the sandals he had taken from him fourteen years ago in the dust. Tears of joy streaming down his face, Bharata took Rama's feet in his hands.

Crying himself, Rama raised his brother up and clasped him tightly. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana prostrated before Vasishta and the other Rishis of the court of Ayodhya. They came to their three mothers, Kausalya, Sumitra and a sad Kaikeyi – now cured of the brief madness that had made her banish Rama and end Dasaratha's life in grief – and prostrated before those queens.

The people of Uttara Kosala were beside themselves with delight, to have their precious prince return. As Rama rode into Ayodhya from

Nandigrama with his brothers, the crowd showered his chariot with garlands and flowers in every colour. They danced and waved the cloths they wore across their chests like flags in a wind.

Bharata still carried Rama's sandals, Sugriva and Vibheeshana held the silken whisks, the chamaras, and Hanuman held the royal white parasol over Rama's head. Shatrughna carried Rama's bow, the Kodanda, and his quiver. Sita had his kamandalu in her hands, Angada his sword, and Jambavan held his gold-inlaid shield.

Rama was like the full moon surrounded by a galaxy of stars, and all the more splendid for their complementing his grace and lustre. When Rama entered the palace at Ayodhya it was like prana, vital breath, returning to a corpse and animating the senses again. A tide of joyful energy coursed through the palace, the city, the very kingdom.

Kausalya and Sumitra, Rama and Lakshmana's mothers, would not leave their sons, but set them in their laps like small children and bathed the princes in their tears.

In accordance with Vedic ritual, their Kulaguru Vasishta sheared Rama's jata, which he had worn in the forest these fourteen years. Ceremonially, he bathed the prince, who would be crowned, in waters fetched from the four oceans and from all the sacred rivers of Bharatavarsha, even as Brihaspati did Indra, before the Deva was crowned king in Swarga.

Rama was clothed in resonant silks and shimmering, priceless ornaments, as were his brothers, and they were regal indeed, they were resplendent. Sita, also bathed and adorned, was beauty incarnate. Now the auspicious hour, the muhurta, had arrived, and Bharata prostrated before his brother Rama and asked him to take the throne of Ayodhya. Rama accepted formally and Vasishta set the ancient crown of the House of Ikshvaku, of the sons of Vaivaswata Manu, son of Surya Deva, upon Rama's head. Vishnu's Avatara had broken the shackles of evil in which Ravana had bound the world, and dharma ruled the earth again.

Rama ruled his people as a father does his children, and the varnasrama was followed naturally and justly not only throughout Kosala but the world. When Rama, perfect king, ruled, it seemed the krita yuga had returned to the earth! His grace was upon every kingdom, every forest and mountain – a pervasive light shone in the hearts of all the living, and Rama was its source.

Jungle, river, mountain, land and sea yielded their bounties in surfeit to the people and creatures, when Rama ruled. Anxiety, disease, decrepitude, grief, fear and dejection vanished from men's spirits, like darkness before the sun. Miraculously, men died only when they wished to.

Rama had no queen or mistress besides Sita – the holy tradition that every Rajarishi observed in those times – and he taught his subjects the way of dharma both by scriptural teachings and, more, by example, his own life.

As for Sita, she was the perfect wife and queen. With her humility, her gift at divining her husband's thoughts, her love and tenderness, her selfless service to him as if she served herself, her wisdom and discernment, her immaculate conduct and her modesty, she won his heart entirely."

UTTARA RAMAYANA

SUKA CONTINUED, "WITH HIS GURU VASISHTA'S HELP, RAMA PERFORMED many great yagnas in Ayodhya, to worship the Blue God who is the embodiment of all the Gods, and who was his own self. During one mahayagna, he gave away the eastern portions of his kingdom to the hota priest, the lands of the south to the brahmaa priest, the western lands to the adhvaryu, and the northern territories to the brahmana that chanted the Saaman, the udgatr priest.

Now only Ayodhya and the central portions of his kingdom remained with Rama and he wanted to gift these to one that was beyond any attachment: he gave them to his Kulaguru Vasishta. Thus, he gave away everything that he owned and all that remained with him were his clothes and the ornaments upon his body. All that Sita had left was her sacred wedding taali, the necklace that told she was his wife.

When the brahmanas saw his absolute renunciation and devotion, they blessed him with all their hearts and promptly gave back all those lands to him.

The priests cried, 'Holy One, Lord of All, these gifts are as nothing compared to what you have given us. You have freed the earth from terror. You have entered our hearts with your boundless love and dispelled the ignorance that dwelt there. We salute you, O Parabrahman who have been born as Rama. We worship you, O God who are always a refuge to your bhaktas, whose light never grows dim, who are the most renowned Being, whose holy feet are firmly planted in the hearts of those that have relinquished hatred.'

One night, as was his wont, Rama wandered through his city, disguised as a commoner. He did this to learn the actual condition of his kingdom and subjects, rather than depend on reports of ministers or courtiers, who might keep what was unpleasant from him.

Suddenly, from a house at a dark street corner he heard a man's angry voice raised, obviously against the citizen's wife.

'I won't keep you here a moment more!' the voice cried. 'You have lived in another man's house, an evil man's house. Our king Rama may be uxorious, but I don't mean to become like him! Sita lived in the Rakshasa's palace for a full six months, yet Rama keeps her with him as his queen. But I am no dotard like him.'

Rama reeled; he went back to his palace in a daze: so this is what the people were actually saying about him, and about the chaste Sita. But unlike the man he had just heard berating his wife, Rama was a king. He must enjoy the absolute respect of his subjects, even if his subjects were entirely in the wrong with their opinions and measured the character of an incarnate Goddess by their own lowly standards.

Rama sent the chaste Sita away from him. He asked Lakshmana to take her into the jungle and abandon her there, so she would never return. The heartbroken Sita found sanctuary in the Rishi Valmiki's asrama. When Rama exiled her she was with child.

When her time came, Sita delivered twin sons in the forest, Rama's splendid princes. Valmiki named them Lava and Kusa, and the Sage performed all their birth passage rites.

Lakshmana's wife bore him two sons, whom they named Angada and Chitraketu. Bharata had two sons as well – Taksha and Pushkala – and so did Shatrughna, whose boys were called Subaahu and Srutasena.

Bharata conquered the four quarters of the earth in his brother Rama's name and he slew a great number of fractious and hitherto invincible Gandharvas. He brought vast treasures from his conquests and laid them at Rama's feet.

Shatrughna marched north and slew the Rakshasa Lavana, who was invincible for a magical bow he possessed. Shatrughna killed him while he was out of his city on a savage hunt. He killed the Demon with an astra that Rama gave him. Lavana was Madhu's son and Shatrughna founded the sacred northern city of Mathura in the forest named after Madhu, the Madhuvana.

When her sons were young men and old enough to fend for themselves, Sita gave them into Maharishi Valmiki's charge. She had just about managed to keep her spirit in her body to raise the young princes; every moment of her life spent apart from Rama was hellish for her.

Sita called out to her mother Bhumidevi. The Earth Goddess opened herself in a cleft. Her daughter – whom King Janaka had once found at the base of his golden plough outside his city Mithila – Sita, Janaki, entered the earth upon a magnificent throne that rose mysteriously from the cloven ground. It was the end of her life.

When Rama heard, he was beside himself with grief. Over and over, he recalled her perfections and was a broken man. He survived her by thirteen thousand years – this was the Treta yuga – and he performed agnihotra in his home without a wife. He never took another queen or woman and remained celibate the rest of his years.

When those years of Ramarajya were over, the years of a blemishless rule when Vishnu's Avatara ruled the world from the throne of Ayodhya, throne of the House of the Sun, Rama entered the Sarayu in jalasamadhi with his brothers and all his people. He was absorbed into the Brahmam of which he was an amsa. He left behind the memory of the Maryada Purushottaman, who had his tender feet pierced by thorns in the Dandaka vana to save humankind, to redeem the earth from evil.

Yet for the Being who Rama was, all the Munis agree that everything he did – crossing the sea and vanquishing Ravana and his demons – was as child's play: for Hari's Incarnation, for God Himself. These Sages hold that Rama had no real need for the help of Sugriva's vanaras, but that it was all just his sport, Vishnu's lila.

There are those who say that while he lived on earth Rama was like any mortal man – for Ravana could be slain only by a mortal man – and he had no knowledge of Who he truly was. He suffered like any mortal man to save the world from evil.

I bow at that Rama's feet, where the Gods and kings alike lay their heads. I seek my sanctuary in Rama, whose fame touches the four quarters of heaven and earth, burns our sins and adds brilliance to the golden plates that the Diggajas wear upon their temples! I bow to Rama, whom the Rishis of the earth hymn in every sabha.

Parikshit, anyone in Kosala who ever saw Rama, touched him, sat with him, walked with him or followed him – all these attained moksha, the condition which the greatest yogis find after many lifetimes of tapasya. Kshatriya, he that hears the legend of Rama and cogitates upon it enters the peace in his heart, discovers bhakti and is set free from the bonds of karma."

The Raja asked, "Tell me more about Rama, for I feel his peace upon me, Suka Deva. How did he live? How did he treat his brothers, who I have heard were amsas of him? And how did his kinsmen and his people treat their divine king?"

"When he returned from Lanka and was crowned, Rama sent his brothers to the corners of the earth on a Digvijaya, a conquest of the four quarters. When this was accomplished, Rama himself travelled across his kingdom, going among the people of Kosala so they could see him, touch him if they wished, speak to him. They all saw the light that he was upon the world and they knew that he was the source of the light and peace in their own hearts.

Of course, first of all, he went to every home and corner of Ayodhya. When he came home from Lanka, he saw his city with its highways damp with holy water and the scented ichor from elephants in musth. It seemed to him that Ayodhya gazed at him as a woman does at her husband whom she has not seen in fourteen years: with desire!

Rama wandered through the terraced homes of Ayodhya, and he knew every family that lived in his city; he knew all their names. He saw the children that had been born during his exile. He came to the sentinels' towers and climbed them; he entered all the sabhas of the people, where they meet to discuss any matter that needed discussion.

Rama worshipped at all the temples of the city, with golden domes most of them. He roamed the areca-nut groves, the banana plantations, their trees laden with fruit. He saw the fine silk banners of Kosala flapping in the soft breeze; he saw the excellent artefacts and mirrors, the drapes and garlands that adorned the houses of Ayodhya, and his heart was glad and full.

Wherever he went, the people flocked round him. They gave him gifts and sang his praises, about how he had killed the Demon in Lanka and freed the world from evil.

Someone cried, 'Lord Vishnu, protect Bhumidevi as you once did as the Varaha!'

Where the crowd was too thick for them to come out into the street where Rama walked, the people climbed onto their terraces and their eyes feasted upon his form, his face. They flung down storms of bright and redolent flowers over their king.

At last, Rama came to the palace, from where his awesome ancestors had ruled the earth. And who can adequately describe the palace of the House of Ikshvaku? Why, it was as magnificent as Indra's palace in Devaloka.

Its doors were of solid, deep coral, Parikshit; its interminable rows of pillars were embedded with priceless chrysoberyl, cats-eyes as the gems are more commonly known. Entire floors of many chambers were made of huge slabs of emerald; diamonds and crystal encrusted the walls, making them shimmer. Numberless and invaluable were the jewels and pearl strings that adorned the king's palace in Ayodhya; of divine craftmanship were the furniture, furnishings and the paintings and sculptures in that palace. Indeed, unearthly craftsmen had fashioned all these through the ages.

Wonderful lamps lit the interiors of the palace and the air was laden with incense. The men and women that lived in Rama's palace were truly like Gods and Goddesses, and their beauty was an ornament to the unworldly ornaments they wore.

In such a palace did Rama live, in peace, in grace: Rama, greatest among those that are masters of themselves, the restrained. For some hundreds of those thirteen thousand years, Sita lived in joy with him, both of them full of love for each other. Holy men came from the corners of the earth to see the king who was Vishnu's Avatara, and went away with their eyes and hearts full.

Rama, who was an embodiment of dharma, ruled the Earth from Ayodhya and she flowered in his grace, and was replete with all things beautiful, harmonious and sacred. Love flowed in every heart, in every creature. Even today the grace of that perfect Kshatriya and his reign are upon our world that grows darker and smaller each moment, O King."

KUSA AND HIS DESCENDANTS

SUKA SAID, "RAMA'S SON KUSA HAD A SON NAMED ATHITHI; ATHITHI'S son was Nishadha; his son was Naabha, whose son was Pundarika. Pundarika begot Kshemadhanva, who sired Devaaneeka, whose son was Aneeha, whose son was Paariyaatra, who begot Balasthala.

Balasthala's son was Vajranaabha, who was an amsa of Surya Deva himself. His son was Khagana, whose son was Vidhriti, who begot Hiranyanaabha, who became the Muni Jamini's sishya and a master of yoga himself. Hiranyanaabha taught Yajnavalkya of Kosala the truth of the Atman, by which a man overcomes ignorance and finds illumination.

Hiranyanaabha's son was Pushya, whose son was Dhruvasandhi, whose son was Sudarshana, who fathered Agnivarna, who sired Seeghra and his son was Maru. Maru is a perfect master of himself and of yoga. He is still alive and dwells in Kalaapagraama, a mystic village. As the kali yuga ends, he will awaken from samadhi and renew the dynasty of the Sun, founded by Vaivaswata Manu; for by then the House of Ikshvaku will have perished.

Maru's son was Prasusruta, and his son, Sandhi. Sandhi's son was Amashana, whose son was Mahasvaa, who begot Viswasaahva, from whom Prasenajit was born. Prasenajit's son was Takshaka and his son Brihadbala, whom your father Abhimanyu slew during the Great War, the Mahabharata yuddha."

Suka paused, then asked softly, "This is the past of the House of the Sun. Would you hear of its future now?"

Parikshit was eager, and the Sage resumed, and told of times yet to be. "Brihadbala's son shall be called Brihadrana and his son Urukriya, who will beget Vatsavriddhi, whose son shall be Prativyoma. Prativyoma's son will be Bhaanu, his son Divaaka, who will be a Senapati of great aksauhinis.

Divaaka's son will be Sahadeva, his son the valiant Brihadasva, his son Bhaanumaan, his son Prateekaaswa and his prince, Suprateeka. Suprateeka will beget Marudeva, and he Sunakshatra, who will sire Pushkara, who will father Antariksha, who shall beget Sutapas.

Amitrajit will be Sutapas' son, and his son, Brihadraaja, who will beget Barhis, who will sire Kritanjaya, whose son will be Rananjaya, who will sire Sanjaya. Saakya shall be Sanjaya's child, and his son Suddhoda, whose son will be Laangala, and his son Prasenajit, whose son shall be known as Kshudraka.

Prasenajit's son shall be called Ranaka, and his son Suratha, whose prince and heir shall be Sumitra, the last of the dynasty of the House of the Sun. In the kali yuga, Sumitra dies, leaving no heir and with him the House of Ikshvaku also perishes," said the seer, blithely, as if he saw all these generations clearly before his eyes.

THE LINEAGE OF NIMI

SRI SUKA SAID, "IKSHVAKU'S SON NIMI, THE GREAT, ASKED VASISHTA TO be his priest when he undertook an important yagna.

But Vasishta said, 'Indra has already asked me to be his priest for a yagna in heaven, and I accepted. Let me finish that sacrifice and I shall be your priest. Wait until I return.'

Nimi made no reply, and Vasishta went in a vimana to Devaloka, to perform Indra's yagna for him. But King Nimi was a wise man and he knew that this mortal life is a fleeting thing and its duration uncertain. He began his sacrifice before his Kulaguru Vasishta returned. He enlisted the help of some other brahmanas to conduct the yagna.

When Vasishta came back to the Earth, he learnt what Nimi had done and was furious. He cursed his sishya: 'You are so arrogant that you dare disobey me. You think you are wise, Kshatriya, but I curse you to die this instant!'

Nimi believed his master had transgressed dharma to curse him. He, too, had considerable spiritual powers and now, in a flash, he cursed Vasishta back: 'In your greed for Indra's wealth, you forsook dharma. I curse you that you shall also die!'

Nimi pronounced his curse, and being a knower of the Atman, put aside his body even as one does a worn set of clothes. Vasishta also left his body, died, and he was born as the son of Mitra Deva and Urvashi. The brahmanas of his sacrifice embalmed Nimi's body in medicated oils. They completed his yagna in the presence of the corpse and when it was over, they said to the Devas that came for the havis, 'If you are pleased with the yagna, let Nimi's corpse have life again!'

But at once a disembodied voice spoke there. Nimi's voice said, 'I have no wish to be a prisoner in my body again. None of the wise wants to have a body, knowing that they must soon leave it. They worship the feet of the Lord Vishnu, where they find deliverance from the round of births and deaths.'

The Devas said, 'Very well, you shall not have a body, but you will dwell in the eyelids of every living being.'

It is because King Nimi dwells in our eyelids that we blink.

But now the Rishis of the kingdom feared that, without a proper king, anarchy would rule humankind. They rubbed and churned Nimi's body, chanting mantras all the while, until it grew hot as fire and a child sprang forth from it. They named him three names.

Because of the extraordinary manner in which he had been born, they called him Janaka. Since he was born of a man that had left his body, they named him Vaideha. Since he was born by the occult churning, the mathana, of a corpse, they called him Mithila. The city Janaka founded was named Mithilaa, after him.

Janaka's son was Udaavasu, whose son was Nandivardhana, who begot Brihadratha, who sired Mahaaveerya. Mahaaveerya's son was Sudhriti, whose son was Dhrishtaketua, whose son was Haryasva, whose son was Maru. Maru begot Prateepaka, who begot Kritiratha, whose son was Devameedha, whose son was Mahaadhriti, who begot Kritiraata, who fathered Maharomaa.

Maharomaa begot Svarnaromaa, who begot Hrasvaromaa, whose son was Seerahdwaja. It was when this king was ploughing some land outside Mithilaa to plant a crop he would use for a yagna that he found a shining little girl child in the furrow his plough made. She was Sita.

Seeradhwaja's son was Kusadhwaja, who begot Dharmadhwaja, who had two sons called Kritadhwaja and Mitadhwaja. The former's son was Kesidhwaja, while the latter begot Khaandikya. Kesidhwaja became a master of himself, a Yogin that knew the Atma Vidya. Khaandikya feared his cousin because of this and ran away from the kingdom.

Kesidhwaja begot Bhaanumaan, who begot Satadyumna, whose son was Suchi, who fathered Sanadwaaja, who begot Oordvaketu, whose son was Aja, whose son was Purujit. Arishtanemi was Purujit's son, and his son Srutaayus, who begot Suraarsvaka, who begot Chitraratha, who sired Kshemadhi.

All these kshatriyas were kings of Mithilaa.

Kshemadhi's son was Samarataha, who begot Satyaratha, who begot Upaguru, who begot Upagupta, who was an amsa of Agni Deva. His son was Vasvananta, who begot Yuyudha, who sired Subhaashana, who begot Sruta, whose son was Jaya, whose son was Vijaya, who sired Rita.

Rita's son was Sunaka, who begot Veetahavya, who begot Dhriti, who begot Bahoolasva, who begot Kriti, whose son was Mahaavasi.

Parikshit, all these kshatriyas were Rajarishis, taught the science of the Atman, of enlightenment, by masters like Yajnavalkya. They ruled great kingdoms from Mithilaa, yet remained unattached to all things mundane and material, even while they led the lives of kings and grihastas," said Suka.

PURURAVAS OF THE HOUSE OF THE MOON

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJAN, LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT THE LUNAR DYNASTY now, the lineage of the royal house of the Moon. Kings of vast fame and glory were born into this line, like Aila, also known as Pururavas.

In the golden Lotus that sprouted from thousand-headed Padmanaabha – the Cosmic Being who lay asleep upon the Ekarnava, the single ocean of the Origin – Brahma was born. From Brahma's sacred ancestral mind a Rishi was born, equal to his Father in every quality. He was Atri.

When he sat in tapasya for an age, tears of ecstasy flowed from Atri's eyes, and from those nectarine tears Soma Deva, the Moon, took birth. Thus, Soma's nature is like nectar. Brahma gave his grandson lordship over the brahmanas, all the green and living world of plants and trees, and the stars.

Soma Deva performed many a Rajasuya Yagna; he conquered the three worlds and had himself crowned a king of all kings. But he was vain and proud, and in his arrogance he abducted Deva Guru Brihaspati's wife Tara, who was also smitten by him. Brihaspati sent many messengers to Soma, including his father Angiras, begging him to return Tara; but all his entreaties fell on deaf ears. Soma kept Tara, and he enjoyed her.

The Devas supported their Guru and declared war on Soma. Sukra Deva, the Asuraguru, saw his chance to divide the Gods of light and brought a Demon army to fight for the Moon. Now, Angiras was Rudra's Guru and Rudra took Brihaspati's part, with his fierce and wild ganasanghas and his ferocious bhutasanghas. This was the first Deva–Asura yuddha, and the beginning of the long enmity between the two races. Blood flowed in streams across the three realms.

Finally, at Angiras imploring him, Brahma himself intervened and commanded Soma to return Tara to Brihaspati. Having no choice, Soma complied and the war ended. Brihaspati received Tara back joyfully. He forgave her in his great love and wisdom and it seemed that she was also content. In a few weeks, it became plain that Tara was with child.

Brihaspati raged at her, 'Evil woman, your womb is my field to sow my seed! The child growing in you is not mine, but, ah, I am keen to have a son.'

In time, Tara gave birth to a baby that shone like gold. Both Brihaspati and Soma Deva claimed that the wonderful child was his. The Devas and Rishis called Tara and demanded sternly whose the infant was. She would not answer them, but kept silent.

Then, her son cried at his mother, 'Evil woman! You hide your sin with false modesty. Tell them the truth! Whose son am I?'

Tara grew extremely agitated and Brahma drew her aside and asked gently, in private, 'Tara, whose son is the boy?'

Tara bent her gaze down and said softly, 'He is Soma's.'

Soma was delighted and took him to his home. As the boy grew, the Lord of the stars was overjoyed to find him exceptionally intelligent. Brahma named the sparkling, mercurial youth Budha.

As I told you earlier, Rajan, King Pururavas was the son of Ila and Budha. Once, Narada Muni extolled Pururavas – his wealth, power, handsomeness, majesty and valour – to the heavenly Apsara Urvashi and she fell in love with the mortal kshatriya.

She had been cursed by Mitra and Varuna, for being unfaithful to both of them, when Vasishta was reborn. They cursed the ravishing Urvashi to be cast down from Devaloka and to spend some years on Bhumi. Languishing in the mortal world, she heard from Narada about Pururavas and a powerful sense of fate stirred in the nymph.

Gathering her courage, Urvashi came to Pururavas. When he saw her unearthly beauty, the likes of which he had never seen before, his eyes bulged and his hair stood on end. He fell madly in love.

Softly, Pururavas spoke to the Apsara, who stood before him, quivering, 'Come sit beside me, lovely one, and be my queen for long years!'

Urvashi replied seductively, 'Rajan, no woman could resist a man like you. Why, my eyes cannot tear themselves from your form and, ah, my body longs for your embrace! Indeed, I shall live with you. But I have two conditions.'

'Anything,' said he, without hesitation.

'Look, O King, at these two pets of mine, these rams. Guard them for me like your most precious treasure, and I will live with you for as long as you do. Secondly, I must never see you naked except when we are making love.'

Pururavas hardly heard her. He murmured, 'Ah, what a body, what a face. Such charm! Anyone would be fascinated by you, and here you have come to me of your own accord. Sweet love, willingly do I grant you your conditions, if you will stay with me. Which man would not?'

So the unearthly Urvashi stayed with the king and they made love, day and night, even as Chitraratha the Gandharva king had with her in Swarga. She was a mistress of the art of love, an expert in giving pleasure. Her body was scented like a lotus and, drunk with the fragrance of her mouth, he kept her with him for years.

Meanwhile, in Devaloka, her home, Indra began to miss Urvashi, who was the most beautiful Apsara in his kingdom. He felt his world had faded without her and was hardly worth living in. Indra sent some fine Gandharva elves down to the Earth to fetch her back.

The sky rangers entered Pururavas' palace stables at midnight, and spirited away Urvashi's two precious rams. The golden-fleeced creatures bleated loudly as the powerful Gandharvas carried them off and Urvashi jumped up in her husband's bed.

She loved the two rams as if they were her children and now, eyes flashing, the nymph cried, 'Ah, I am betrayed! My husband is a eunuch that he broke his solemn oath to protect my rams. He calls himself a great kshatriya, but he cannot keep his word and is worthless. Pururavas, you are a man only when the sun it out. You hide here like a terrified woman in the night, while thieves steal my precious children away.'

Like an elephant prodded with a goad, the king leapt roaring out of bed. Without bothering to clothe himself, he grasped up his sword and ran after the Gandharvas and the bleating rams!

It was a perfectly dark night. Some way down the palace yard, the Gandharvas let the rams down and illumined the darkness with brilliant lightning. Peering from her window, Urvashi saw her husband and the rams – he was as naked as the day he was born. Pururavas fetched the rams back to their luxurious pen. He returned to his bedchamber but his nymph, his love, was not in it. He realised that he had broken both the conditions she made when she first came to him.

Manic dejection seized the king. He looked for her everywhere; dementedly, he combed the earth for Urvashi. One day, he saw her at Kurukshetra, in the golden river Saraswati. She was with five other nymphs, and cheerful and merry as if she had lost nothing!

The desperate king cried, 'O my love, how can you leave me like this? I cannot live without you. I beg you, talk to me or this warrior's body, which pleased you again and again, so you cried out, will fall dead here and be food for jackals and vultures.'

Alarm flashed briefly in her gorgeous eyes. She replied, 'Ah, don't die. You are a strong man, aren't you? Then you must know that all women are like wolves, bent just on devouring a man. And like wolves, women have no enduring love, friendships or mercy. They are savage and vicious, and they will risk anything, betray and deceive anyone, to get what they want.

Why, for the pettiest end women have been known to kill their husbands, even their brothers, who trusted them with their lives. They only pretend loyalty and fidelity to those that have not seen into their true nature; while all the time, they seek new lovers, new lust and its satisfaction.'

She saw how stricken he was, a great kshatriya stricken by the heart's terrible lightning. He seemed to crumple before her eyes. She sighed and said, 'Very well, my lord. At the end of every year, I will spend one night with you. I will also bear you another child, besides this one that grows in me now.'

The stunned king returned to his capital. Somehow, he survived a year without his golden nymph, though he thought of her every moment: her eyes, her body, and her lovemaking past compare. The day the year ended Pururavas came back to Kurukshetra and roared in joy when he saw Urvashi approaching him along the banks of the Saraswati. She carried a resplendent infant in her arms.

They spent the night together, just as they used every night once when she was with him, making delirious love beside the river. Came dawn and she saw he was broken again at knowing that she would leave him once more for a year.

Pity stirred in the Apsara's heart and a love that was unknown to her, always free, kind. She said to him, 'You must worship the Gandharvas, for only they can give me to you forever.'

Pururavas set about singing the praises of the heavenly minstrels, the immortal sky-rangers. Pleased, the Gandharvas came down to him, shimmering, and gave him a fire vessel, in which he could light a sacred fire to perform the ritual by which he could attain their realm and his love.

Mad, blind with love, Pururavas thought the vessel was Urvashi herself and in a waking dream ranged the world with it for a while. Then, in the heart of a forest, he realised it was just a vessel to light a fire to find the Apsara; it was not Urvashi herself. He left the fire vessel in that jungle in despair and went home to his palace.

There, he sat down to meditate, to calm his mind. Of course, it was only upon Urvashi that he meditated. All that night he thought of her and that same night it was that the krita yuga ended and the treta yuga dawned. Suddenly, in his dhyana, the Traayi, the three Vedas that deal with rituals, appeared in a vision. The Veda had been one and single so far; now, it became three!

Rising from his dhyana the king rode back to the jungle where he had left the fire vessel that the Gandharvas gave him. Calmer now, he saw that he had set that sacred thing at the foot of a sami tree. Strangely, from that sami, growing as graft from her womb, he saw an aswattha. Still, only the thought of Urvashi and reaching her filled Pururavas' mind.

The king broke off two twigs, one from each tree. He laid the feminine sami twig below and rubbed the masculine twig from the aswattha against it. He used them as kindling sticks, aranis that are used to light a fire of sacrifice. He thought of the sami twig as being Urvashi and the aswattha as himself. He placed a piece of wood between the twigs, which he thought of as being their child.

He chanted a mantra as he rubbed the aranis together – *Urvashyam urasi Pururavah: Pururavas is upon Urvashi!* He also chanted other mantras for kindling a sacred fire.

In a flash, a wonderful fire sprang forth from the aranis. It was called Jaataveda because it was the fire that gave a man every pleasure, every wealth, even the pleasures of heaven. The king consecrated that fire with dhyana as prescribed in the three Vedas that had appeared to him in his palace.

The fire became the triune fire of Aahavaneeya, Gaarhapatya and Dakshinaagni. Pururavas adopted the fire as his son, for this was the fire that led to the realm of the Devas and to Urvashi, his love. The king offered sacrifices to Vishnu in the agni, Hari who is the embodiment of all the Devas, the omnipotent One who is beyond the senses. Pururavas asked to attain the world where Urvashi was.

In the krita yuga, Pranava – *AUM*, which includes every sound in the universe, was the only Veda. So, too, Narayana was the only God; the sacred fire was one, as well, Agni; and all humankind was one single varna. Sattva was the ruling guna and every being was spiritual.

When the treta yuga began, the one Veda became three because of what Pururavas did, and rajas became the dominant guna. With the help of his son, the threefold Jaataveda agni, that king attained the world of the Gandharvas and Urvashi became his wife again," said Suka Deva, whose wisdom, many say, is unmatched in the three worlds.

THE LEGEND OF PARASURAMA

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJAN, BUDHA AND ILA'S SON PURURAVAS HAD SIX SONS by the Apsara Urvashi. They were Aayus, Srutaayus, Satyaayus, Raya, Vijaya and Jaya.

Srutaayus' son was Vasumaan; Sataayus' son was Srutanjaya; Raya's prince was Eka; Jaya's boy was Amita. Vijaya's son was called Bheema. Bheema's son was Kanchana and his son, Hotraka.

Hotraka's son was the legendary Jaahnu, who, while performing achamana in the Ganga, took the whole river in his cupped palms and drank her in a sip! Hence, she is called Jaahnavi.

Jaahnu's son was Purum the great, who begot Balaaka, who sired Ajaka. Ajaka's son was Kusa, who fathered four princes – Kusaambu, Moortaya, Vasu and Kusanaabha.

Kusaambu's son was Gadhi, the great. The Rishi Reechaka once came to Gadhi and asked him for the hand of his daughter Satyavati. Gadhi did not think Reechaka a proper groom for his daughter and said, 'We belong to the noble house of the Kaushikas. You must give me dowry of a thousand horses, white as the moon and with one blue ear.'

Reechaka realised why the king demanded the impossible dowry. The Rishi went to Varuna, who owns the most fabulous horses in the three worlds, and got a thousand horses just as Gadhi wanted from the Lord of seas. The Sage married the beautiful Satyavati.

Soon, both his wife and her mother implored him for a son, one for each of them, since Satyavati had no brother. Reechaka prepared two bowls of charu – a sacrificial offering of food – and blessed each with a different set of mantras. One was meant for his wife and the other for his mother-in-law.

He set these down and went to bathe before giving them to the women. Before he came back from the river, Satyavati's mother asked her for the charu. Satyavati thought her husband would have prepared the superior charu for the queen since the child born from her would be king one day. She gave her mother her charu and ate the other herself.

Reechaka returned from his bath and immediately divined what had happened. He said to his wife, 'What have you done? Now you will have a fierce son, a scourge to his enemies, why, a terror to the very world, and your mother will have a gentle son, a knower of the Brahman.'

Sobbing, Satyavati fell at his feet and begged him that her son should not be a terror. He took pity on her and pronounced, 'Very well, then, your son shall be a gentle soul, but his son, our grandson shall be the dreadful one who is meant to be born into these times anyway.'

In course of time, the gentle and sagacious Jamadagni was born as their son. Satyavati was so pure that she was transformed into a holy river – the Kaushiki that purifies the earth, named for the clan into which she was born.

Her son Jamadagni married Renu's chaste daughter Renuka. Jamadagni fathered many sons on her, the eldest being Vasumaan. Yet, the one born to be the bane of the kshatriyas of the world, the one of whom his grandfather Rishi Reechaka had prophesied, was the youngest. He was called Rama, and later Parasurama, the axe-wielder, and the great Sages all speak of him, who razed the Haihayas, as being an amsa and Avatara of the Lord Vasudeva.

In twenty-one battles, he wiped the kshatriyas of Bharatavarsha from the face of the Earth, making rivers of their blood. Indeed, it was for this mission that he was born, for the kshatriyas had become a powerful and arrogant burden upon Bhumi Devi. Rajas and tamas ruled them by now, and they persecuted even Brahmanas and Munis. It is told that not all the kshatriyas were vain or tyrants, but Parasurama spared none of them."

Suka Deva paused and Parikshit asked, "What did the kshatriyas do to Parasurama that he slew them all?"

Sri Suka said, "The king of the Haihayas, Arjuna, was a mighty kshatriya sovereign. He was a devotee of Dattatreya, who was of course an Amsaavatara of Narayana. He served the holy one meticulously, and worshipped him in every way. Dattatreya blessed Kartaveeryarjuna with a thousand arms, invincibility against his every enemy, awesome power and strength of his limbs and senses, lustre, splendour, vast riches, valour, renown.

Arjuna gained mastery over yoga and the eight occult mahasiddhis. He could shrink to the size of an atom with the siddhi of anima, and he ranged everywhere like the very wind.

Once Sahasrarjuna – Arjuna of the thousand arms – was bathing in the river Narmada with his women, near his capital Maahishmati. He wore a wildflower garland, a vaijayanti, and was drunk on wine. Intoxicated and aroused, he decided to stop the flow of the river and spread his thousand arms across it, damming the current. The river flowed helplessly back upstream, flooding her banks.

It happened that the ten-headed Rakshasa Ravana was abroad on his conquest of the world. He had come to challenge Kartaveeryarjuna. Ravana, who had both Brahma and Siva's boons of strength and invincibility against every enemy, except mortal men, believed that he was the greatest warrior, the greatest hero on earth.

Ravana was offering his daily worship in his camp, offering lotus flowers in the holy river after his bath, when the Narmada herself turned round suddenly, extinguished his sacred fire and quickly washed his whole camp away. The furious Demon attacked Arjuna downstream. But Arjuna seized him in his thousand hands and held the Rakshasa as easily as he would a child, humiliating the Demon before his women, who laughed at the ten-headed one.

Arjuna brought Ravana back to his city and locked him in a dungeon in Maahishmati. Later, at Brahma begging him to let the Rakshasa go, Arjuna released Ravana, like a monkey from a cage, and the vanquished Demon never dared challenge the mighty Haihaya again.

Then, once, while hunting in a jungle far from his city, Kartaveeryarjuna came upon the asrama of Jamadagni. The Sage received him affectionately and laid out a feast for the king, his soldiers and ministers. The only wealth Jamadagni had was his tapasya, but in those days the cow of wishes, Kamadhenu, lived in his hermitage and she provided everything for the feast.

Seeing the unearthly fare at the Sage's table, which he could not hope to match in his palace, not with all his power, wealth and servants, Arjuna desired Kamadhenu for himself. He burned with such envy that he stamped away from Jamadagni's asrama without tasting a morsel of the wonderful food.

When he turned back towards his city, the arrogant Kartaveeryarjuna sent his Haihaya warriors to seize Kamadhenu, who gave the Rishi Jamadagni whatever he needed for his worship and yagnas. They took the cow of wishes and her calf, lowing in terror, to Maahishmati.

Parasurama was away from his father's hermitage when all this occurred. He returned to find Kamadhenu gone and Jamadagni distraught. He was incensed as a serpent that has been stepped upon. He seized up his battle-axe, his Parasu, his bow, quiver and his shield and went after the king's legion. He waylaid them as a lion does an elephant.

Kartaveeryarjuna was just about to enter Maahishmati when Parasurama, clad in deerskin, his axe glinting, his body shining, his jata like the rays of the sun, arrived. Arjuna sent seventeen aksauhinis, one after the other, with elephant, horse and chariot, with footsoldiers who carried every manner of weapon, from swords to blazing satagnis, to subdue the brahmana.

Moving swiftly as the wind, the mind, Parasurama hewed them all down. Wherever he swung his axe, the earth was adorned with truncated corpses, severed arms, legs and heads, with cloven chariots, their charioteers slain.

Frothing to see his army razed so contemptuously by the axe-bearing Rama, to see all the shattered chariots, the dismembered corpses, the field slushy with the blood of his men, Arjuna now rushed at Parasurama. The

Haihaya held five hundred bows in five hundred hands and loosed a storm of arrows at Parasurama.

The brahmana was invincible. As if from another realm of time, he shred the storm in the air, cutting down every one of Kartaveeryajuna's shafts with his single bow. Roaring like the Pralaya, Arjuna uprooted great trees, he seized up mountain crags, with all his arms, and ran at Rama with them.

Playfully, laughing, Rama cut off all thousand arms like the hoods of a thousand serpents, his axe flashing quicker than time or thought. With the final stroke of his blade, he struck off Arjuna's head, like a peak off a great mountain. Kartaveeryarjuna fell in geysers, lakes, of his own blood.

The Haihaya's ten thousand sons saw him fall and fled from the field in witless terror. Parasurama retrieved Kamadhenu and her calf and brought them home to his gentle father. He told Jamadagni what he had done. The Rishi was mortified.

'Ah Rama, my valiant son, you have sinned!' cried Jamadagni. 'For no good cause you have killed an anointed king, in whom all the Gods dwell. We are brahmanas – it is our gentleness and patience that are the font of our position and influence in the world. Why, our ancestor Brahma, after whom we are named, became Paramesthi, the sovereign of the world, by tapasya and forbearance, not by violence.

It is his patience and forgiveness that makes the brahmana glorious, makes him shine like the sun – for Hari, Lord of us all, is quickly pleased with those that forgive. Rama, to kill a king, upon whose head holy water was poured to consecrate him as a ruler of men, is a sin worse than killing a brahmana.

My child, you must go on a tirthyatra to all the sacred fords in the world and bathe at each one. You must meditate upon the Lord Achyuta, with perfect yoga, to expiate your crime,' said Jamadagni."

THE BLOODLETTING

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAMA HONOURED HIS FATHER'S WORD. HE WENT ON a year's pilgrimage to all the holiest tirthas in the land and bathed in each of the sacred rivers. He did penance for his sin of killing Kartaveeryarjuna and came home cleansed of it.

Once more, he lived peacefully in Jamadagni's asrama. One day, his mother Renuka went as usual to the river to fetch water for her husband's daily homa, his fire sacrifice. There she saw the Gandharva king Chitraratha, wearing a garland of unearthly lotuses, sporting with a bevy of Apsaras in the water. Ah, he was handsome, radiant, and more beautiful than any being she had ever seen. Renuka stood enchanted, gazing at the Gandharva, her mind full of desire.

Suddenly, she realised that an hour had passed while she watched Chitraratha from hiding. Quickly, she filled her waterpot and ran back home through the forest. She brought the water to Jamadagni and stood before him with folded hands. He read her mind as clearly as if she told him what had happened at the river; he saw how she had lusted after the Gandharva.

Jamadagni cried in wrath to his sons, 'Kill her! Kill this adulteress.'

The eldest did not stir to obey his father, and so, too, down the line, none of the others. Then came Parasurama's turn, and without a moment's hesitation, he beheaded his mother and his disobedient brothers with his axe.

Jamadagni was delighted. He embraced his son and cried, 'Choose any boon at all and you shall have it, faithful child!'

Parasurama said, 'Let my mother and my brothers live again and let them not remember who killed them.'

At once, Renuka and her sons rose, alive, as if from a deep sleep. Parasurama always knew the awesome power of his father's tapasya, and he killed his mother and his brothers, knowing that Jamadagni could restore them to life.

Meanwhile, the sons of Kartaveeryarjuna, who fled when Parasurama slew their father, found no peace anywhere. They burned for revenge, felt they would die if they did not avenge their father's death. They stalked Jamadagni's asrama. One day, Parasurama and his brothers went deep into the forest, and the Haihaya princes saw their chance.

They crept like ten thousand shadows into Jamadagni's yagnashala and found the Rishi sitting in dhyana, meditating upon the Lord Narayana. They came upto him softly and murdered him before he opened his eyes. Renuka came there, and begged them not to despoil her husband's corpse. But those vilest of kshatriyas, full of wrath and hatred, cut off the gentle Rishi's head and took it with them, streaming blood.

Renuka beat her breast and screamed for her sons, especially one of them. 'Rama! Rama!' she wailed dementedly. 'Oh Rama, where are you? Come to me!'

Far away her cries pierced the forest and fell on Parasurama's ears. He came flying through the trees and saw his father lying in his sacrificial enclosure, headless before the holy fire, in a spreading pool of crimson.

Parasurama's cries echoed through the forest. 'O my father! Holy one, most righteous father, how have you left us all and gone to Swarga?'

He sobbed like an infant; then, sorrow turned to anger and his eyes as red as the innocent Jamadagni's blood leaked onto the ground. Parasurama gave his father's corpse into the hands of his brothers, seized up his battle-axe and set out to avenge Jamadagni.

He went first to Maahishmati, cursed for the murder of a pure Rishi. There he made a hill of the heads of the kshatriyas he slew, the ten thousand sons of Arjuna, in the heart of that city. But that was just his first campaign.

He blamed the hubris of the kshatriyas for the tragedy that had overtaken him and swore to wipe the very race of kings from the earth.

Twenty-one campaigns Parasurama went on, and he did indeed kill almost every kshatriya in the world. In the holy place called Samantapanchaka, he made five lakes of warriors' blood. Finally, he returned to his father's asrama, his face and body dark with all the murdering he had done. He came with the head of Jamadagni that he had recovered and undertook a long yagna there.

He affixed the severed head to Jamadagni's neck, laid them on a bed of kusa grass and worshipped the Brahman, his own Soul, which embodies all the Gods, with more than one kind of sacrificial ritual. As dakshina, he gave the continents of the east, which he had effectively conquered by killing all their kings, to his hota priest. He gave the southern lands to the brahmaa priest, the western ones to the adhvaryu priest and those of the north to the udgaataa.

The kingdoms between he gave the other priests of his sacrifices and the middle lands to Kashyapa Prajapati. He gave Aryavarta to the upadrashta priests and any lands left over he divided among those that attended his yagnas.

At last, purified of all his violent sins of slaughtering a generation of kings, he had his avabhritasnana, the closing ablution, in the golden Saraswati, the holy river that is an embodiment of the Veda. She bore his last vestiges of sin away and he shone like the sun emerging from a bank of black clouds.

And by his son's intense love, Jamadagni lived again in a glorious spirit body. He lived in the sky now as one of the Saptarishi, the seventh star in the northern constellation, and Parasurama saw him in adoration and worshipped him."

Suka Deva paused, before continuing, "The lotus-eyed Parasurama, Jamadagni's son, shall be the one that propagates the Veda in the next Manvantara. Even today, Parikshit, he lives upon Mount Mahendra, where Siddhas, Charanas and Gandharvas sing his praises. He lives in peace and dhyana, having renounced violence forever, though there was never another warrior who could match his prowess.

And so it was that Hari, the Lord, who lives in us all, incarnated himself in the clan of the Bhrigus and cleansed the world of its kings, the kshatriyas who had become an arrogant burden upon her.

Gadhi, the great, had a son called Viswamitra. The child was born bright as a well-kindled fire. With tapasya, he turned himself from a kshatriya into a brahmana and a Brahmarishi. Viswamitra had a hundred and one sons, among whom the middle son was Madhuchandas. So all of them were called the Madhuchandas, collectively.

Viswamitra adopted Ajigartha's son Sunashepa, of Bhrigu's line, whose life the Devas spared. The boy was sold to Harishchandra's son Rohita, to be sacrificed in the prince's place to Varuna. Viswamitra saved the boy's life by teaching him a hymn and some prayers to the Prajapatis and the Devas, to sing and chant during the yagna.

Viswamitra ordered his own sons to acknowledge Sunashepa as the eldest of them. Thus, though by birth he was a Bhrigu, Sunashepa became a legendary Rishi in the line of Gadhi, since Gadhi's son Viswamitra adopted him. He came to be called Devaraata.

Viswamitra's first fifty sons, the Madhuchandas, did not favour the adoption. Their father was enraged and cursed them to become mlecchas, outcastes from the Vedic fold.

When Madhuchandas, the middle son, saw this, he and his fifty younger brothers said in fear, 'We shall obey you, father, whatever you command.'

Sunashepa, who was learned in the mantras, became their eldest brother, for they said to him, 'From now we are your younger brothers.'

Pleased with these obedient sons of his, Viswamitra blessed them, 'You have made me the father of virtuous sons, and you yourselves shall prosper and have noble children. You are of the lineage of Kaushika and you will obey Devaraata in all things.'

Viswamitra had other sons – Ashtaka, Haareeta, Jaya and Kratumaan. The branches of the Kaushika tree were many, all sprung from the sons of Viswamitra. When that Brahmarishi made Devaraata the eldest of his family, his line acquired an unprecedented pravara."

PURURAVAS' OTHER DESCENDANTS

SRI SUKA SAID, "O RAJAN, PURURAVAS' SON AYUS HAD FIVE SONS – Nahusha, Kshatravriddha, Raji, Rambha and Anenas. Listen to the line of Kshatraviddha.

Kshatraviddha's son was Suhotra, and he begot three sons: Kaasya, Kusa and Gritsmada. Gritsamada sired Sunaka, who begot the great Saunaka, who was a master of the Rig Veda.

Kaasya begot Kaasi, who fathered Raashtra, whose son was Deerghatamas, whose son was Dhanvantari, who founded the system of medicine that is known as Ayurveda. Dhanvantari was an amsa of Vasudeva, and he had a share in the havis at every yagna. It is said that just thinking of Dhanvantari can cure any sickness, even the most dreaded disease.

Dhanvantari's son was Ketuman, whose son was Bheemaratha, who begot Divodaasa, who sired Dyumaan. Dyumaan had many names – Pratardana, Shatrujita, Vatsa, Ritadhvaja and Kuvalayaasva. His sons were Alarka and his brothers.

Parikshit, Alarka ruled the earth for sixty-six thousand years of men, and he was always as fresh and vigorous as a young man, why, a youth. No one had achieved this before him. Santati was Alarka's son and his son was Suneetha, who sired Sukatana, who begot Dharmaketu, who fathered Satyaketu, whose son was Dhishtaketu, whose son was Sukumara, who begot Veetihotra, who begot Bharga, whose son was Bhaargabhumi.

So that is the line of kings descended from Kshatravriddha and his son Kaasya. Hear from me now the lineage begun by Ayus' son Rambha.

Rambha's sons were Rabhasa and Gambhira, the mighty. Rabhasa's son was Akriya, from whom a line of brahmanas descended.

Ayus' son Anenas begot Shuddha, who begot Suchi, who sired Dharmasarathy, who was also renowned as Trikakut. Trikakut's son was Shaantaraya, who became a Sannyasi and realised his Atman, so all his desires fell away from him.

Ayus' third son Raji begot five hundred powerful princes. Raji was such a power on the earth that Indra asked him to fight a war for the Devas against the Asuras, who had besieged Swarga and evicted the Gods of light. Raji routed the Demons and restored Devaloka to the Devas.

Indra still feared the awesome Prahlada and his Asuras, so he gave Swarga temporarily to the noble Raji, to protect on behalf of the Devas. Then Raji died and Indra wanted his kingdom back, but Raji's five hundred princes refused. They took Indra's share of the havis from every yagna.

Devaguru Brihaspati cast an evil spell over them so they strayed from the path of dharma and became dissolute. When they were weak through their countless indulgences and sins, Indra attacked and slew every last son of Raji and took Swarga back for himself and his Devas.

Kshatravriddha had a grandson called Kusa, whose son was Parti, whose son was Sanjaya, who begot Jaya. Jaya's son was Krita, whose son was Haryavana, whose son was Sahadeva, who fathered Hina, who begot Jayasena.

Jayasena's son was Samkriti, whose son was another Jaya, whose son was the maharathika, the awesome chariot warrior Kshatradharma. This, then was the line of Kshatravriddhi.

Now listen to the line of Nahusha."

YAYATI AND DEVAYANI

SRI SUKA SAID, "JUST AS ALL EMBODIED BEINGS HAVE SIX SENSES, SO too Nahusha had six sons. He called them Yati, Yayati, Samyati, Ayati, Viyati and Kriti.

Yati, the eldest, refused the kingdom his father offered him, because he had prescience of the evil that was bound to befall one who entered into a life of ruling a kingdom. He knew that such a one must necessarily forget the Atman. So, when Nahusha was cast out of Devaloka and cursed to become a python by the Rishis of swarga because he tried to marry Indra's wife Sachi, Yayati became king of his father's kingdom.

Yayati made his four younger brothers sovereigns, in his name, of the four quarters. He himself married two queens, one a daughter of Maharishi Sukra Deva and the other King Vrishaparva's princess."

Parikshit interjected, "But Sukra Deva is a Brahmarishi and Yayati was just a common kshatriya. How did this wedding of pratiloma happen? How did a man of a lower varna marry a woman nobler-born than himself?"

Suka replied, "Sarmishta, princess of the Asuras, daughter of the Asura king, was known for her extraordinary beauty. One day, she and her sakhis – who included the Asuraguru Sukra Deva's daughter Devayani – were strolling in a pleasure garden, full of fine trees and lotus-laden lakes, over which intoxicated bees and sunbirds with long beaks swarmed and hovered. Coming to the banks of a clear lake, the young women put away their clothes and began to swim and frolic in the sparkling water.

Suddenly, they saw the Lord Siva Parameshwara riding his Bull Nandin, with Parvati seated before him. Shy and flustered, they ran to clothe themselves. In the confusion, the princess Sarmishta pulled on the Asuraguru Sukra's daughter, Devayani's, clothes.

Devayani was furious. She cried, 'The audacity of it! Like a dog eating the offerings made of a yajna, you dare wear my clothes. We are brahmanas and the universe was created by our tapasya. We are the face of God. We are the ones that reveal the splendour of the Brahman to the world. We are the teachers of the Veda. Even the Devās worship us; why, the Lord honours and serves us!

Besides, I am from the highest line of brahmanas, a Bhrigu, and your father, the Asura, is my father's sishya. And you dare put on my clothes – as a Sudra might study the Veda!'

Sarmishta's eyes flashed. Her lip curling, she hissed like a snake stepped upon, 'Dare you talk to me like this! Beggar, you forget yourself – that you are like a watchdog on our home, living on the crumbs we feed you.'

With the help of her other sakhis, the raging princess stripped Devayani naked and flung her into a shallow well nearby. Then Sarmishta and her companions stalked away, back to the palace. Devayani could not climb out by herself.

Meanwhile, Yayati was abroad on a hunt and he was thirsty. He saw the well and rode up to it. He saw Devayani in the well, naked and shivering. He pulled off his royal cloak and threw it to her, so she might cover herself. Then he reached down, gave her his hand and drew her out of the well.

Quivering, her eyes full of sudden love, Sukra's lovely daughter said to him, 'Kshatriya, you have taken my hand in yours. Let no other man ever take this hand. Great King, fate put me in this well and brought you here to rescue me, for the Lord Siva himself passed this way, and he intends us to be together.' She paused, then said, 'Besides, Brihaspati's son Kacha cursed me that I would never marry a brahmana, but only a kshatriya.'

In his heart, Yayati was doubtful about this, since the scriptures say that a man must never marry a woman from a higher varna. Yet, he believed her that God and fate meant them to be together. Besides, once he saw her, as he had, he fell in love with her.

When Yayati left, Devayani came sobbing to her father and told him what Rajakumari Sarmishta had done to her. The Rishi Sukra was aggrieved; he took his daughter and left the Asura king's palace the same day. He went, cursing the priestly livelihood and extolling Oonjhavritti, which is gathering fallen grains from fields, grain markets and subsisting thus.

When the Asura sovereign Vrishaparva heard what had happened, he grew afraid that his enemies might take the powerful Sukra into their kingdoms. He rode after the Asuraguru and prostrated himself before Usanas.

Sukra Deva said to the king, his disciple, 'Do whatever my daughter says to atone for what your princess did. For I will not abandon my child or let her shame go unanswered.'

Vrishaparva agreed immediately and looked at Devayani to discover what she wanted. The young woman said, 'Wherever I go when my father gives me away in marriage, Sarmishta must follow me as my sakhi, she and all her maids that humiliated me.'

Vrishaparva thought for no more than a moment. He knew how potently auspicious Sukra Deva's presence in his kingdom was – he owed all his power and prosperity to his Guru. That Asura king said, 'Sarmishta and a thousand of her sakhis shall be your servants and attend on you.'

Sukra gave Devayani to Yayati, to be his wife. As the wedding party left, he told Yayati that he should never make love to Sarmishta, who went along as Devayani's sakhi now, her maid. Yayati swore he would not.

Soon enough, O Rajan, Devayani was big with child. Sarmishta wanted to be a mother herself, desperately. When she was in her fertile time, she accosted Yayati privately and begged him to make her pregnant. The king knew that if a noble woman approached a kshatriya at this time, wanting his child, the dharmashastras forbade him from rejecting her. He also remembered Sukra Maharishi's warning to him.

But Sarmishta was an exquisite princess in the ripeness of young womanhood, and Yayati did not spurn her. Thus, Devayani bore the king two sons, Yadu and Turvasu, while Vrishaparva's daughter Sarmishta bore him three – Druhyu, Anu and Puru.

When Devayani found out that Yayati had fathered three sons on Sarmishta, she flew into a rage, left his palace and went back to her father's home. Yayati, who loved her deeply, went after her. He did his best to placate her; he implored her to go back with him. But all his endearments and entreaties fell on deaf ears.

Now, Sukra Deva grew angry and cursed the king. 'You are a dishonourable man, a liar who breaks his solemn word. You are a slave of your lust. I curse you that you become an old man at once!'

Yayati fell at the Sage's feet and cried, 'Ah, I am not sated with your daughter's love. I could not refuse Sarmishta what she asked by dharma.'

Sukra relented, but, of course, he could not withdraw his curse. He said, 'Very well, if you can find someone young to take your age upon himself, you can enjoy his youth and vigour, until you are satisfied.'

Yayati now turned into an old man. He called his eldest son Yadu, and said, 'Son, take my age upon yourself for a time, and give me your youth, for I have not satisfied my desires. It was your mother's father that cursed me to be an old man.'

Yadu replied, 'I have just begun to enjoy life's pleasures, father. How can I give up my youth at this time of my life?'

Yadu begged him, as also he did his other sons, Turvasu, Druhya and Anu. But they were all young men in the prime of vigour, heedless of dharma and deluded that youth lasts forever. All of them refused what their father asked.

Finally, he asked his youngest son, Puru, who was an enlightened youth, saying, 'Son, you must not refuse what I ask as your brothers have done.'

That prince replied without hesitation, 'Of course, you can have my youth, best among men. For there is nothing too precious to give one's father in return for the gift he has given me – that of this body, which is the vehicle to attain the Brahman. Only your blessing will help me attain my final destiny.

My lord, the best son is he that does what his father wants, without his father even having to ask him. He that does what is asked of him is a middling son. A bad son does what he is asked in a tawdry manner. But he who will not obey his father is not fit to be called his son, but rather his excrement.'

Smiling and joyfully, Puru took Yayati's age upon himself and gave his youth to the king. Yayati enjoyed the pleasures of life to satiation. He ruled the seven continents, with undimmed vigour, and he was truly a father to his people and great grace was upon his immense kingdom.

He enjoyed all that life had to offer him, particularly his queen Devayani, who gave herself to him utterly, with all the gifts of her body, her speech, her love and mind.

Yayati performed numerous yagnas, and many a dakshina, to worship the Lord Hari, who is the embodiment of the Devas and the Vedas, He that receives every yagna and removes all sorrow. Slowly, Yayati's mind turned away from all things sensual and material and his heart dwelt more and more upon Vasudeva, who dwells within, who is the subtlest one. He realised the universe appears in Vasudeva, glowing, as a bank of clouds does in the sky; then, it subsides too, like a dream or a fantasy, after the Pralaya.

Soon, Yayati worshipped the Lord without any desire in his heart other than to worship. He asked for no blessing except this.

For a thousand years, that king enjoyed the Earth and all that she had to offer to the five wayward senses and to the mind, which is the sixth sense. Of course, he found no satisfaction in his indulgences."

YAYATI'S RELINQUISHMENT

SRI SUKA SAID, "AFTER SOME THOUSAND YEARS OF BEING IMMERSED IN every sensual pleasure, Yayati became aware of his own spiritual dissipation. He began to be revolted by all things sensual, by such pleasure itself.

One day he said to his queen Devayani, 'Daughter of Sukra, let me tell you a story very much like my own.

Once, a ram wandered through a forest, cropping lush wild grass wherever he pleased. Suddenly, he heard the plaintive cries of a she-goat that had fallen into a well, by the power of her past karma. He peered down into the well and, upon seeing her, desired her.

The lustful ram began to devise a means to draw her out of the well, for she was comely and he wanted to mate with her. Finally, using his long, powerful horns, he burrowed a tunnel in the side of the well and the she-goat crawled out through it.

She was beautiful indeed and, without further ado, they fell to rut in that place. He was in the prime of his young ramhood, and he mounted her potently. Other she-goats, ranging through the forest, seeking mates, saw them mating. They saw how well-built, shaggy, big and virile the ram was. They saw how he never tired while mating.

One of the other ewes approached him and, being a slave to his lust, he mounted and mated with her. But the first ewe, which he had rescued from the well, could not bear to look at him mating with another. When she saw him unfaithful and bent only upon his pleasure, she left him and ran back to her master's house, her heart broken.

The ram did in fact adore her. He ran after her bleating piteously, begging her to come back to him. He, also, arrived in the house of her owner, a brahmana, where repeatedly he tried to mount his ewe, while she butted him in rage and ran from him. The brahmana grew infuriated and, seizing a knife, castrated the ram.

Later, though, seeing his she-goat sorrowing, the Rishi relented, and with his occult power, restored the ram's testicles, so the pair could enjoy mating again to their hearts' content. And ever since, the ram and the ewe have mated, and mated, but he is still not satisfied.'

Yayati paused, before continuing, 'Lovely Devayani, I am exactly like that ram, and as pathetic as he is. For I have lived all my life fascinated by your beauty and making love to you, without ever giving a thought to my soul.

Not the finest foods, not all the wealth on earth, nor even all the most beautiful women can satisfy a man who is a slave to his lust. Desire can never be quenched by indulgence. Like fire fed with ghee, it only burns more powerfully, and enslaves one more every day.

Only when a man finds repose and even-mindedness, only when his mind is unmoved by attachment or enmity does. he discover calm and happiness, in any circumstance in which he finds himself. The man that truly seeks his own welfare should immediately renounce his greed to gratify his senses, which the darkhearted always find so difficult to do. Lust does not decay or age, even when the man himself does.

Those that know say that a man should not sit alone close to even his mother, his sister or daughter. For potent are the senses and even the wisest man cannot resist their inexorable power.

For a thousand years, I have enjoyed every kind of pleasure. Far from dwindling, my desires daily grow stronger, especially my constant lust for you. I have decided that I will give up all my cravings and surrender my heart and my soul to the Lord. I will leave this palace and all this luxury and roam the forest with wild beasts, suffering every extreme of the weather as they do and relinquishing all my vanity.

Every pleasure I have known has been fleeting, but not desire. One should never long to satisfy the senses, for then they enshackle one in darkness. Only he that realises the bondage and ruin that indulgence in sensual pleasure brings is truly learned. He is the enlightened one.'

With this, Yayati returned his son's youth to Puru and took back his own age. He found he truly was without any desire for pleasure now. As for his sons, he made Druhyu king of the southeastern provinces of his kingdom; he gave Yadu the southern portion, Turvasu the west and Anu the north.

Yayati left for the forest to become a Sannyasi. Before he went, he made his youngest son Puru emperor of the earth and all its peoples, while his older brothers were only his vassal kings.

They say that, after indulging them for a thousand years, Yayati rid himself of the bondage of the senses in an instant – even as a fledgling leaves its nest. In a moment, he renounced his vast kingdom, his power, his wealth, and his pleasures. That kshatriya united himself with his Atman, and through that Yoga, he attained to the eternal Brahman – Vasudeva, the perfectly pure, the transcendent, the foundation of all things.

Meanwhile, Devayani understood the parable of the ram and his ewe. She, too, realised that the life she had lived thus far, of pleasure with her husband and in the lap of a loving family around her, was all just maya, a dream. She saw clearly how every association, every bond, every attachment, even the strongest, is all like the brief gathering of strangers at a wayside inn – for a night. She saw that everyone is just a puppet of fate, of God's will.

Devayani, also, relinquished her attachment to the material, worldly life. She, too, absorbed her thought in the Lord, and being her father's daughter, of Bhrigu's race, easily dissolved even her sukshma sarira, her subtle body in the eternal Brahman and attained moksha."

Sri Suka finished the tale, saying, "We salute You, O Vasudeva, replete with every divine quality, Indweller, Infinite One, O Source of peace!"

DUSHYANTA AND BHARATA

SRI SUKA SAID, "LET ME TELL YOU NOW ABOUT THE LINE OF THE noble Puru. Parikshit, you belong to that great lineage yourself, into which so many Rajarishis and Brahmarishis have been born.

Puru's son was Janamejaya, whose son was Prachinvan, whose son was Pravira, who begot Namasyu, who fathered Charupada. Charupada's son was Sudyu, whose son was Bahugava, whose son was Samyati, who begot Ahamyati, whose son was Raudrasva.

Raudrasva married the Apsara Ghritachi, and she bore him ten half mortal, half divine sons – Riteyu, Kuksheyu, Sthandileyu, Kriteyu, Jaleyu, Santateyu, Dharmeyu, Sateyu, Vrateyu and Vaneyu. These princes were to their father as the ten indriyas are to prana.

Riteyu had a son called Rantibhara, who had three sons – Sumati, Dhruva and Apratiratha. Apratiratha's son was Kanva, who begot Medhatithi, whose sons were Praskanva and his brothers, all of whom were brahmanas. Sumati's son was Raibhya and Raibhya begot Dushyanta, so says tradition.

One day, Dushyanta went into the forest to hunt. He took a few soldiers with him. In the jungle, he came to the asrama of Kanva Muni, where he saw a young woman of such beauty that she might be Rema herself, Lakshmi Devi, the Lord's Maya. For so she lit up that hermitage with her lustre.

One look at her and Dushyanta fell in love. The exhaustion he had felt after the long day's hunt left him, and soft joy suffused his being.

Quickened by love, he said to her, 'Who are you, O lotus eyes? Whose daughter are you? Why are you here in the heart of the jungle?

I look at you and see that you cannot be the daughter of any of these Brahmarishis that live here. You must be a kshatriya princess from a great royal house. My heart is fascinated by you and it is an old truth that the hearts of the kings of the line of the great Puru will never hanker after anything that is not dharma.'

The young beauty said, 'I am Shakuntala, the daughter of Viswamitra and the Apsara Menaka. My mother abandoned me in this forest. Rishi Kanva knows about me. Tell me, Kshatriya, what can I do for you?

Magnificent king, come sit here upon this darbhasana. I have some niravara made from wild rice to serve you. Eat what we have and remain here with me, if you care to.'

Dushyanta said, 'Exquisite one, truly you speak as someone born into the line of Kaushika should! And what you say is just, for princesses born into kshatriya houses always have the right to choose their own husbands in Gandharva vivaha. Will you marry me by the free rite, Shakuntala?'

She agreed, for she had also lost her heart to the dashing, mighty Dushyanta. He took her hand and wed her there in the heart of the jungle in the unfettered Gandharva ritual. He spent that night with her, and the next day returned to his capital.

Shakuntala became pregnant, and when her time came gave birth to a splendid baby son. Kanva Maharishi performed the birth and life passage rituals for the child in his jungle asrama. As the child grew, they all saw how powerful and remarkable he was – when he was just a stripling, he caught and tamed the wild lions of the forest, making playmates of them, as if they were little cats!

Shakuntala brought her indomitable son, who was verily an amsa of the Lord Hari, to Dushyanta's palace, but now the king refused to acknowledge that the boy was his. Then an asariri, a disembodied voice, spoke reverberantly from the air, 'The mother is only a vessel. A son belongs to the father from whose seed he is born. No, the father *is* the son. Dushyanta, raise your prince and do not disgrace Shakuntala.

A son who furthers his father's line is the one that fetches his sire out of Yama's realm. You are indeed this boy Bharata's father. Shakuntala does not lie. This child is born with a ray of Vasudeva in him. He is a friend of brahmanas, a youth of his word. He possesses divine vitality; he is generous, grateful, and always willing to serve his elders. He naturally knows virtue and excellence and he will bring glory to your name.'

Dushyanta did not repudiate Shakuntala and his son anymore, but took them to himself. When Dushyanta died, Bharata inherited his father's kingdoms, and became a legendary emperor. The greatness of King Bharata, born from a ray of the Light that is Sri Hari, is still sung in the world. Why, Bharatavarsha is named after him.

Bharata bore the divine mark of the chakra in his right palm and those of the lotus upon the soles of his feet – the marks of the amsa of Vishnu. He was crowned the only emperor of the Earth with a mahabhisheka, and he worshipped the Lord with countless yagnas.

With fifty-five horses of the loftiest pedigree, he performed Aswamedha yagnas along the entire course of the Ganga. Down the length of the Yamuna he performed these sacred horse sacrifices with seventy-eight steeds of the finest bloodlines. Mamata's son Dirghatamas was Bharata's chief priest.

At every tirtha across the Holy Land, Bharata performed his sacrifices. He gave each of a thousand brahmanas that sat over his yagnas thirteen thousand and eighty-four fine badva cows. He gifted fourteen lakhs of the noblest elephants, at Mashnara, their bodies resonantly black and their tusks gleaming white, all caparisoned in golden armour. In all, Bharata performed a hundred and thirty-three Aswamedha yagnas, astonishing every kshatriya king of the earth.

Bharata exceeded the grandeur and glory of the Devas and he attained to the Paramatman, the Supreme Being. Truly, they say that no king before him ever neared the yagnas of Bharata and no king after him ever shall. It shall be as futile to try to emulate his worship as it would be to try to hold heaven in one's hands.

His conquests during these Aswamedha yagnas encompassed the four quarters. He subdued numerous tribes that were inimical to dharma and the Vedic path – the Kiratas, the Hunas, the Yavanas, the Andhras, the Kankas, the Khasas and the Shakas he vanquished, and slew the Mlecchas kings that opposed the way of truth.

Once, when the Asuras called Panis defeated the Devas in battle and abducted some Apsaras and bore them away to Rasaatala, Bharata plunged down into the netherworlds, crushed the demon legions and rescued the heavenly nymphs.

So immaculate was the rule of Bharata, that Swarga and Bhumi, heaven and earth, yielded all their needs, spontaneously, to his subjects. Creation brimmed over with tangible grace. For twenty-seven thousand years Bharata ruled: unchallenged sovereign of the world. Finally, in a day he renounced it all – the power, the wealth, even his very life. He realised it was all fleeting anyway, and gave himself up to the Brahmam.

Bharata married three daughters of the king of Vidarbha. They all bore him children, but he once remarked that none of them looked like him. For fear that he might abandon them the queens killed their sons.

Bharata's royal bloodline was threatened with extinction, and he worshipped the Maruts for a son, with the ritual for the birth of a child known as Marutstoma. They gave him Bharadvaja to be his son, and this is how that came to pass.

Once, Brihaspati wanted to make love to his brother Utathya's already pregnant wife Mamata. As Brihaspati was about to enter his sister-in-law, the child within her protested loudly, wailing in grief. Mamata now tried to draw away, but Brihaspati forced himself into her, effectively raping her in his urgency. In his fever, he also cursed the child in her womb to be blind for trying to stop him from having his way.

Brihaspati ejaculated forcefully into Mamata's body, but the blind infant in her womb thrust his seed out with its foot. That seed fell upon the ground and instantly became another child. Mamata wanted to abandon that baby, give it away, since she feared that her husband would renounce her for her infidelity.

A heated argument flared up between Mamata and Brihaspati, both of whom wanted the other to raise the child. And he was named from that argument, from the roots of the words they exchanged. The Devas urged them not to abandon the child, but that is what they both did.

Brihaspati cried in a froth, 'Foolish woman, he is born of us two, *bhara dvajam imam*, so you must raise him!'

To which Mamata replied, 'Yes, he is born of us two, so you shall raise him best!'

Both walked away, leaving the brilliant child there, and the Maruts took him and raised him. For what his mother and father had said – *bhara dvajam imam* – they named him Bharadvaja.

When Bharata's royal line was threatened with extinction, it was this child they gave him, to be his heir."

RANTI DEVA, THE KIND ONE

SRI SUKA SAID, "BHARADVAJA WAS ALSO KNOWN AS VITATHA, BECAUSE he was gifted to Bharata when that king's line was about to become extinct. His son was Manyu, who had five sons – Brihadkshatra, Jaya, Mahaveerya, Nara and Garga.

Nara's son was Sankriti. O Pandunandana, joy of Pandu's clan, Sankriti had two sons, Guru and Ranti Deva. Ranti Deva's praises are sung both in this world and in Swarga. For he was a truly reposed spirit, who lived entirely upon what fate brought him, and was perfectly contented. Even when he himself had pangs of hunger, he would give away food that came his way to someone else.

He lived without possessions. His mind was calm and his nature steadfast, and he and his family suffered many privations.

Once, he spent forty-eight days without food or drink passing his lips. Finally, he happened to receive some payasa, made of cooked wheat, ghee and water. His family had also eaten rarely during those forty-eight days, he himself not at all, and he shook with hunger and thirst.

They were just about to share the payasa among themselves when a brahmana guest arrived in their kutila. Ranti Deva received him reverentially and gave away a goodly portion of the precious payasa to the visitor, for he always saw Hari dwelling everywhere and in everyone. The brahmana ate his fill, and left blessing his host.

Some payasa still remained and as Ranti Deva began to share it out among his family, a sudra arrived there, hungry. Ranti Deva fed him the portion of the payasa that he had shared out for his family. Still, some payasa remained and Ranti Deva and his family were about to divide that among themselves, when they heard some dogs baying outside.

A hunter and his pack of dogs had arrived at their hut and the vetala said, 'Master, my dogs and I are hungry, give us something to eat!'

Without hesitating a moment, Ranti Deva gave the last of the payasa to the huntsman and his pack. The vetala ate his fill and his dogs licked clean whatever he left. The remarkable Ranti Deva saw only the Lord in all of them and he prostrated on the ground before that God.

When the hunter and his dogs left, there now remained just enough water for Ranti Deva and his family to drink. After his wife and children had drunk, he was about to set the water vessel to his parched lips when a chandala arrived there and cried piteously, 'Ah, give this wretch a few sips of water, if you have nothing else to give.'

Ranti Deva saw the man was panting from thirst. The ascetic who had been born a kshatriya said, 'I do not pray to the Lord for the eightfold spiritual powers, nor even for moksha. I want only to dwell within all living creatures and share their every suffering, and help alleviate their pain.'

He gave the thirsty chandala the last of his water to drink. As the water passed the man's lips, Ranti sighed, 'Ah, such peace! When he drank that water, all my torment left me – my hunger and thirst, my tiredness, my weakness, my grief and misery, my mind's suffering.'

And as the chandala finished drinking, Brahma, Vishnu ad Siva, who bestow the fruit of their karma to all the living, revealed themselves before Ranti Deva. For they had been the brahmana, the sudra, the vetala and the chandala, they that are all the Gods and the One, who had cloaked themselves in maya to approach the merciful kshatriya.

Ranti Deva, who had preferred death to denying a thirsty chandala, prostrated before them. By the grace of the great Gods, all the illusions of samsara, the karmic bondage of a thousand births and deaths, vanished before the bhakta's eyes like a dream and he attained the highest freedom and bliss.

By his grace and his sacrifice, his sishyas also became great yogis, their hearts full of bhakti for the Lord Narayana," said Suka.

He paused now, then continued with his sacred Purana, while Parikshit sat raptly before him, never moving. Sri Suka said, "Garga's son was Sini, whose son was Gargya. Though Gargya was born a kshatriya his sons were recognised in the three worlds as brahmanas.

One of Manyu's sons was Mahaveerya, who begot Duritakshaya, who had three sons – Trayyaruni, Kavi and Pushkaruni. These, too, though born kshatriyas attained brahmanahood.

Manyu's eldest son Brihadkshatra had a son called Hasti, who founded the legendary city of Hastinapura. Hasti had three sons, Ajamedha, Dvimidha and Purumidha. Of these, Ajamidha's son Priyamidha became a brahmana, as did some of his other sons, as well.

Another son of Ajamidha's was called Brihadishu, whose son was Brihaddhanu, who begot Brihatkaaya, whose son was Jayadratha. Vishada was Jayadratha's son and his son was Senajit, who begot Ruchirasva, Dridhahanu, Kaasya and Vatsa.

Ruchirasva's son was Para, who sired Prithusena and Nipa. Nipa fathered a hundred sons and also married my daughter Kritvi and their son was Brahmadatta. Brahmadatta was a Yogi, married an amsa of the Devi Saraswati and begot Vishvaksena upon her. With Muni Jaigishavya's counsel, Brahmadatta created the Yogatantra.

Vishvaksena's son was Udaksvana, whose son was Bhalada, and these are the children descended from Brihadishu.

Another son of Hasti called Dvimidha begot Yavinara, whose son was Kritiman. Kritiman's son was Satyadhriti, whose son was Dridhanemi, whose son was Suparshva. Suparshva's son was Sumati, who begot Sannatiman, whose son was Kriti.

Kriti studied the Yogashastra from Hiranyanabha and became a master of the six groups of Prachyasamas. His son was Nipa, who begot Ugrayudha, whose son was Kshemya, who begot Suvira, whose son was Ripunjaya, who begot Bahuratha.

Hasti's third son Purumidha never had sons himself. Ajamidha married Nalini and fathered a son called Nila, who in turn begot Shanti, whose son was Sushanti, whose son was Puruja, who begot Arka, whose son was Bharmyasva, who had five sons – Mudgala, Yavinara, Brihadishu, Kampilya and Sanjaya.

Bharmyasva said to his five splendid princes, 'You five are capable of ruling the five provinces of my kingdom that are like my five senses.' And because they ruled five kingdoms, they were known as the Panchalas.

From the eldest prince, Mudgala, a line of brahmanas descended and the sons of that line were called Maudgalyas. Mudgala had a son called Divodasa and a daughter called Ahalya. Ahalya married the Rishi Gautama and their son was the pious Satananda, whose son was Satyadhriti, who was a master of weapons and astras.

Satyadhriti's son was Saradvan, who watched the Apsara Urvashi bathe naked in a river and could not contain himself. He ejaculated his seed into a clump of munja grass. The Sage went away but his seed formed itself into twins – a splendid boy and girl. King Shantanu, of the House of the Moon, was out hunting one day when he saw the shining twins, abandoned, and he took them home to his palace and raised them as if they were his own.

For where he found them, he named the male child Kripa – God's grace to him – and the little girl Kripi. The boy, Saradvan's son, grew up to become the Acharya Kripa, while Kripi married another Acharya, who would profoundly influence the times into which he was born – the mighty Drona."

BHEESHMA, KURU, THE PANDAVAS AND OTHERS

SRI SUKA SAID, "RAJAN, DIVODASA'S SON WAS MITREYU, WHO HAD FOUR sons called Chyvana, Sudasa, Sahadeva and Somaka. Somaka's firstborn son was Jantu; he had a hundred sons besides, of whom the youngest was Prishata.

Prishata's son was Drupada, whose sons were Dhrishtadyumna and his brothers, and his daughter was Draupadi. Dhrishtadyumna's son was Dhrishtaketu. All these kshatriyas were born into the clan of Panchalas descended from Bharmyasva; they were all known as Panchalas.

Ajamidha had another son called Riksha, whose son was Samvarana. Samvarana married Surya Deva's daughter Tapati, and their son was the great Kuru, who ruled Kurukshetra. Kuru's sons were Parikshit, Sudhana, Jahnu and Nishadasva.

Sudhanu's son was Suhotra, whose son was Chyvana, who begot Kriti, who fathered Vasu, who could fly through the air. Vasu's sons were Brihadratha and his brothers, who became kings of the Kusambas, the Matysas, Pratyagras and Chedipas. All these ruled portions of the country known as Chedi.

Brihadraha's son was Kusagra, who begot Rishabha, whose son was Satyahita, whose son was Pushpavan, whose son was Jahnu. Brihadratha's most famous son, however, was born to him by another wife, through a Rishi's blessing. This child was born in two halves though, and his mother had the bisected foetus cast out of the city gates. The rakshasi Jara joined the halves with sorcery, breathed life into them and made a magnificent infant.

For the manner in which he came to life, they called him Jarasandha, 'joined by Jara'. Jarasandha ruled Magadha and his son was Sahadeva, who begot Somapi and Srutasravas.

Kuru's son Parikshit had no children. His son Jahnu begot Suratha, whose son was Viduratha, who begot Sarvabhauma, whose son was Jayasena, whose son was Raadhika, who sired Ayuta.

Ayuta's son was Krodhana, who begot Devatithi, whose son was Rishya, who fathered Dilipa, whose son was Prateepa. Prateepa's three sons were Devapi, Shantanu and Bahlika. Devapi renounced the royal life and went away into the forest to become a Sannyasi.

Shantanu – who was Mahabhishek in his previous life – became king in Hastinapura. Shantanu was a gifted soul and it is told that if he touched anything worn or old, it became fresh and young again. Indeed, he was called Shantanu because his presence brought Shanti, peace, wherever he went.

Once, for twelve years, Indra did not send rain to his kingdom. Shantanu called his most learned brahmanas and asked them why the king of the Devas cursed him with such a drought. They said to him, 'You enjoy kingship and the kingdom while your elder brother is still alive. You have become a parivetta, a usurper. If you want the rains to come again, you must give the kingdom back to Devapi.'

Shantanu went to the jungle and begged his brother to become king. But before he did this, some ministers in his court, who for their own ends wanted Shantanu to continue as king, sent some brahmanas to Devapi to corrupt him, lead him away from the path of the Veda. Misled by them, Devapi harshly condemned the sacred scripture – he became unfit to be a king.

Immediately as Shantanu's older brother spoke against the Veda, Indra sent the rains down again upon the kingdom and the drought ended. Devapi continues to live as a hermit in the village called Kalapa, the life of a yogin. It has been said that he shall live on through the kali yuga, when the dynasty of Soma Deva becomes extinct. When a satya yuga dawns again, Devapi shall regenerate the House of the Moon.

Prateepa's youngest son Bahlika had a son called Somadatta, whose sons were Bhuri, Bhurisravas and Sala.

Shantanu married the Devi Ganga, the holy river, and they had a matchless son called Bheeshma. He was a master of dharma, knowing all its subtlest nuances, and he was a knower of the Atman, too. Even the mighty Parasurama was impressed by Bheeshma's valour and his prowess at arms.

Many years after Ganga left him, Shantanu married the fishergirl Satyavati, who was in fact a king and an Apsara's daughter, whom a fisherman had found and raised. Before she met Shantanu, Satyavati had a son through an encounter with the Rishi Parasara. This son was the realised Sage, who composed the Purana and saved the Veda from extinction – the great Vyasa, my father, Parikshit. It was Vyasa Dwaipayana himself, the island born son of Parasara and Satyavati (and not his other disciples like Paila), who taught me this sacred Purana to which you are listening.

Shantanu and Satyavati had a son called Chitrangada, whom a Gandharva of the same name killed in a duel, when Shantanu's son was a mere youth. Shantanu also had a younger son called Vichitraveerya. When he grew to young manhood, his older brother Bheeshma abducted two princesses, daughters of the king of Kasi, from their very swayamvara.

Vichitraveerya was a gentle soul and, though he was crowned king in Hastinapura for a vow that Shantanu swore to Satyavati's father as her bride price, he spent his days absorbed in his young queens. Bheeshma, though he was not the king, ruled the land. But soon, Vichitraveerya caught a galloping consumption and died before making mothers of his wives Ambika and Ambalika.

The throne of Hastinapura, royal House of the Moon, had no heir. Satyavati summoned her firstborn son Vyasa, with a mantra he had given her once, and he sired the Kuru heirs on Vichitraveerya's widows, and also one on a servant maid. These princes were named Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidura.

Dhritarashtra, born blind, married the Gandhara king's daughter Gandhari and sired a hundred sons in her. He also fathered a daughter called Dussala. The eldest of all these hundred and one was the evil, powerful Duryodhana, an incarnate Demon.

Pandu, born an albino, incurred a Sage's curse in the forest that the day he made love to either of his two wives, Kunti or Madri, he would die. He renounced the kshatriya's life and retired to an ascetic's life in the jungle. He was desperate to have children, because his grandmother Satyavati had warned him since he was a boy that a man who had no sons could never enter Swarga when he died.

Kunti used a mystic mantra that the Rishi Durvasa had taught her when she was just a girl in her father's house – a mantra to summon a Deva of her choice to conceive a son! Thrice she chanted the mantra in three years and she bore three resplendent princes by the Gods Yama, Vayu and Indra. They called the boys Yudhishtira, Bheemasena and Arjuna.

Then Kunti chanted the mantra for Madri, who summoned the Aswins of heaven and they fathered the twins Nakula and Sahadeva on her. Pandu raised the five wonderful princes, Devaputras, as his own sons in the forest hermitage. And they were called the Pandavas, after him.

All five Pandavas married the same exquisite queen, Drupada's daughter Draupadi. They all fathered sons by her, but these princes were all slain in their youth, before they became fathers themselves.

Draupadi's son by Yudhishtira was Prativindhya. Bheema's son by her was Srutasena, Arjuna's prince Srutakirti, Nakula's son Satanika, and Sahadeva's boy was called Srutakarma.

The Pandavas did have other children by women other than Draupadi. Yudhishtira fathered Devaka in Pauravi. Bheema begot Ghatotkacha on Hidimbi and Sarvagata on Kaali. The mountain-daughter Vijayaa bore Sahadeva a son called Suhotra. Nakula sired Niramitra on Karenumati; Arjuna had Iravan by the Naga princess Ulupi and Babhruvaha by Chitrangadaa, the daughter of the king of Manipura. Babhruvaha remained with his maternal grandfather, who had no son of his own. This was a condition imposed on Arjuna by the laws of Putrikaadharma, which that royal house followed, since in every generation a daughter was born into it.

Arjuna also married Krishna's half-sister Subhadra and their son was the invincible, golden prince – the peerless Abhimanyu, greatest of all kshatriyas." Suka paused, his eyes shining gently, then said, "And, of course, Abhimanyu was your father, O Parikshit; he sired you in King Virata of the Matsyas' daughter, the princess Uttaraa.

All Dhritarashtra's sons, Duryodhana and his brothers, were slain during the great Mahabharata yuddha. Then Drona's son Aswatthama loosed the Brahmasirsa, most dreadful astra, roaring that the weapon would be the end of the line of Pandu and his sons. You, O King, were still in your mother's womb and she was in mourning for the war had claimed your sixteen-year-old father's life as well.

The invisible astra burned you in your mother's womb and when her time came, you were stillborn. But Krishna, the Lord's Avatara, had sworn that you would live and, laying his sacred hands upon you, he brought you back from the dead. And so were you named Parikshit, the tested one, for you had encountered death in your mother's very womb.

Now we come to the future. Precious King, you have four sons – Janamejaya, Srutasena, Bheemasena and Ugrasena. Janamejaya knows that you shall die from Takshaka's sting and he will perform a sarpa yagna, at which he will offer every living snake into the agnikunda, in the sacrificial fire. He will conquer the world and worship God with an Aswamedha and other imperial yagnas, with Tura, of the line of Kavasha, as his priest.

Janamejaya's son Satanika shall acquire the Veda from Yajnavalkya himself; he shall learn warfare and the use of the astras from Kripa, and the knowledge of sacred rites and the Atman from Saunaka.

Satanika's son shall be Sahasranika, whose son will be Asvamedhaja, whose son shall be Asimakrishna, who will beget Nemichakra. When floods on the river Ganga drown Hastinapura, this scion of your royal house shall go to live in Kausambi.

Nemichakra's son will be Utka, whose son will be Chitraratha and his son Kaviratha. Vrishtiman will be Kaviratha's son, his son Sushena, his son Suneetha, his son Nrichakshus, his son Sukhinala, his son Pariplava, who will beget Sunaya. Sunaya's son will be called Medhavi, his son Nripanjaya, his son Durva, his son Timi.

Brihadratha shall be Timi's son, his son Sudasa, his son Satanika, his son Durdamana, his son Vahinara, his son Dandapani, his son Nimi and his son Kshemaka. This is the great line of Soma Deva, a house of both brahmanas and kshatriyas, honoured by the Devas and Rishis.

In the darkness of kali yuga, this luminous line of great souls shall end with Kshemaka, who will have no sons."

Suka paused again before continuing, "Let me tell you now about the future scions of the royal house of Magadha, descended from the mighty Brihadratha and his son Jarasandha, whom a demoness joined to make him whole and alive.

Jarasandha's son Sahadeva, who is king in Magadha now, will have a son called Marjari, who will also be called Somapi. Somapi's son will be Srutasravas, his son Ayutayus, his son Niramitra, his son Sunakshatra, his son Brihatsena, his son Karmajit and his son Sritanjaya.

Sritanjaya's son will be called Vipra, his son Suchi, his son Kshema, his son Suvrata, his son Dharmasutra, whose son will be named Sama, his son Dyumatsena, his son Sumati, his son Subala, his son Suneetha, his son Satyajit.

Satyajit's son shall be Viswajit, his son Ripunjaya, and all these princes of the House of Magadha shall rule for a thousand years."

THE SONS OF YAYATI AND THEIR SONS

SRI SUKA SAID, "ONE OF YAYATI'S SONS WAS ANU. ANU'S SONS WERE Sabhanara, Chakshu and Paroksha. Sabhanara's son was Kaalanara, whose son was Srinjaya, who begot Janamejaya, whose son was Mahasila, whose son was Mahamanas, who begot Usinara and Titikshu.

Of these, Usinara had four sons called Sibi, Vana, Sami and Daksha. Sibi had four sons, Vrishadarbha, Suvira, Madra and Kaikeya.

Mahamanas' other son, Titukshu, had a son called Rusadratha, whose son was Hema, whose son was Sutapas, who begot Bali. Bali's wife had no children, so the Rishi Dirghatamas was called to beget sons in her. He sired six sons in that queen – Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Suhma, Pundra and Andhra.

These six ruled six provinces named after themselves, on the eastern portion of the land of Bharata. Anga's son was Khanapaana, whose son was Dviratha, who begot Dharmaratha, whose son was Chitraratha, who was more commonly known as Romapada. Romapada had no children and was a friend of Dasaratha, king of Ayodhya.

From the kindness of his heart, Dasaratha gave Romapada his daughter Shanta to raise as his own. She would marry the innocent Sage Rishyasringa. Once, Indra withheld the rains over Romapada's country. The king had heard of Rishyasringa, who was born of a female deer, and whose spiritual powers were legendary.

Romapada sent his most beautiful and seductive courtesans to lure Rishyasringa into his kingdom and city from the forest where he lived.

They enticed him with song and dance, by showing him flashes of their exquisite bodies, by touching and embracing him, by bringing him fine gifts from the king.

Rishyasringa had once performed the Putrakameshti yagna for Dasaratha, by which that king had his four great sons. Now, in Romapada's city, he undertook the propitiatory sacrifice called Ishti for Indra. The rains came down and, wonderfully, the childless Romapada now had a son – Chaturanga. He paid Rishyasringa by giving him his adopted daughter Shanta to be his wife.

Chaturanga's son was Prithulaksha, who had three sons – Brihadratha, Brihadkarma and Brihadbhanu. Of these, Brihadratha begot Brihanmanas, whose son was Jayadratha. Jayadratha fathered a son in Sambhuti and that prince was called Vijaya. Vijaya's son was Dhriti, whose son was Dhritivrata, who sired Satkarma, whose son was Adhiratha.

Adhiratha had no children. One day, when he went to the banks of the Ganga to worship the Sun, he saw a wooden box floating downstream on the current. He retrieved the box and in it lay a splendid infant, apparently abandoned. In fact, this child had been born to the princess Kunti when she was a maiden living in her father's house.

She chanted a mantra that the Rishi Durvasa taught her and Surya Deva appeared before her and got her with child. Her divine baby was born instantly and she floated him down the holy river that flowed at the bottom of her garden in a wooden box, saying a prayer to his unworldly father to bless and to watch over him.

Adhiratha adopted the infant, never knowing whose child he was, but seeing how magnificent he was, and how bright, and raised him as his own son. This child, the Pandavas' eldest brother, became King Karna of Anga. Karna's eldest son was Vrishasena, whom his uncle Arjuna killed during the Mahabharata yuddha."

Again a pause, then Suka went on, "Yayati's third son Druhyu had a son called Babhru, whose son was Setu. Setu begot Arabdha, whose son was Gandhara, whose son was Dharma, who fathered Dhrita, who begot Durmanas, whose son was Prachetas. Prachetas had a hundred sons, who journeyed to the north and became the kings of the barbarian mlechchas.

Yayati's second son Turvasa begot Vahni, who begot Bharga, whose son was Bhanuman, whose son was Trinabhanu, who begot Karandhama the Munificent. Karandhama's son was Maruta, who had no children and adopted Dushyanta to be his son. Though adopted by Maruta, Dushyanta wanted to be a king and returned to his own ancestral family.

Let me now tell you about the sacred line of Yayati's eldest son, Yadu. The wise all agree that hearing about this line, the Yadavas, a man is set free of his very sins. For it was into this Royal House that the Lord himself was born, as a man, as the dark Avatara – as Krishna.

Yadu had four sons of renown – Sahasrajit, Kroshta, Nala and Ripu. Of these, Sahasrajit's son was called Satajit, whose sons were Mahahaya, Venuhaya and Haihaya. Haihaya's son was Dharma, who begot Netra, who begot Kunti, who begot Sohanjit. Sohanjit's son was Mahishman, whose son was Bhadrasena, who begot Durmada and Dhanaka. Dhanaka's sons were Kritaveerya, Kritagni, Kritavarama and Kritaujas.

Kritaveerya's son was the awesome Kartaveeryarjuna, who became sovereign of all the earth and its seven seas. He was a sishya of Dattatreya, who possessed vast spiritual and yogic powers. Surely, no king of the earth has remotely approached Kartaveeryarjuna in yagna, in daana, in tapasya, in yoga, in sruta, which is knowledge of the scriptures, in veerya or valour, in jaya or triumph, and other achievements, too.

He lived for eighty-five thousand years in this world and enjoyed unmatched power and every pleasure. No one could stand against him in battle and his wealth was inexhaustible. He always kept the Lord in his heart. During his battle against Parasurama, all his many sons died, except five – Jayadhvaja, Surasena, Vrishabha, Madhu and Urjita.

Jayadhvaja's son was Talajangha, who had a hundred sons himself. All these hundred were slain by Sagara, with the power he had by the blessing of the Rishi Aurva. Vitihotra was Talajangha's eldest son; his son was Madhu, who also had a hundred sons. Of these hundred, Vrishni was the eldest.

The royal line found its renown because of Vrishni, Madhu and Yadu. The kings and kshatriyas that followed these sires would be known as Vrishnis, Madhavas and Yadavas.

Yadu's second son Kroshta begot Vrijinavan, whose son was Svahi, who begot Ruseku, whose son was Chitraratha, whose son was Sasabindu, who was a Mahatman, a great and remarkable soul in ways both mundane and spiritual. He possessed the fourteen treasures – elephants, horses, chariots, the most beautiful women, astras, wealth, a garland of unearthly flowers, fame, the finest raiment, a tree of wishes, a shakti, a paasa, a gemstone of great power and a vimana that flew through the air.

Sasabindu was the sole ruler of the earth. He had ten thousand wives and a million sons at least. Of these, six are best known and remembered. Of the six, Prithusravas' son was Dharma. Dharma's son was Usanas, who performed a hundred Aswamedha yagnas. His son was Ruchaka who had five sons of his own.

Ruchaka's sons were Purujit, Rukma, Rukmeshu, Prithu and Jyamagha. Jyamagha married Saibya. The couple had no children, but Jyamagha was terrified of his wife and dared not take another queen. He worshipped the Viewedevas and his manes, the Pitrs, to have a son.

Once, after a successful campaign he brought home the beautiful young daughter of a king he had vanquished, to be his concubine. When he arrived home, with the princess in his chariot, he saw Saibya smouldering at him from the palace steps. Jyamagha trembled.

Stridently, his wife demanded, 'Unfaithful husband! Who is the woman you have at your side, sitting in my place?'

Quailing inwardly, Jyamagha replied, on the spur of the moment, 'Why, she is your daughter-in-law.'

Saibya smiled sardonically, 'I am sterile, and you have no other wife to bear you sons whom she can marry.'

Jyamagha felt a strange hope dawning upon him, as if the advent of the princess at his side marked a turn of fortune in his life. He declared with perfect faith, 'You shall have a son yourself and this girl shall become his wife.'

It is told that the Viswedevas and the Pitrs blessed King Jyamagha at that moment. The same night Saibya conceived and delivered a handsome son, whom they named Vidarbha. When he grew up, he did indeed marry the girl whom his father brought home as a spoil of war and she became Saibya's daughter-in-law."

THE LINEAGE OF KRISHNA

SRI SUKA SAID, "VIDARBHA HAD THREE SONS – KUSA, KRATHA AND Romapada, who was the joy of the clan. Romapada's son was Babhru, whose son was Kriti, who begot Usika, who begot Chedi. Chedi's sons were Damaghosha and his brothers called the Chaidyas.

Romapada's brother Kratha begot Kunti, whose son was Dhridhti, who begot Nivriti, whose son was Dasarha and his son was Vyoma. Vyoma begot Jimta, who begot Vikriti, whose son was Bheemaratha, whose son was Navartha, who begot Dasaratha.

Dasaratha begot Shakuni, whose son was Karambhi, who begot Devarata, whose son was Devakshatra, whose son was Madhu, who begot Kuruvasa, who begot Anu. Anu's son was Purohotra, who begot Ayus, whose son was Satvata. Satvata had seven sons – Bhajamana, Bhaji, Divya, Vrishni, Devavridhi, Andhaka and Mahabhoja.

Bhajamana married Nimlochi, and by her, he had two sons, Kinkina and Dhrishti. Bhajamana also married a second wife, by whom he had three sons, Satajit, Sahasrajit and Ayutajit.

The Rishis have spoken thus of Devavridha and his sons, 'Upon seeing them close, we find they are as marvellous as the reports we heard of them. Babhru is the noblest of men, while Devavridha is like a god. Because of Babhru and Devavridha, fourteen thousand and sixty-five souls found moksha!'

Satvata's son Mahabhoja was also a king of dharma; from him, the line of the Bhojas originated.

Vrishni had two sons, Sumitra and Yudhajit. Yudhajit's sons were Sini and Anamitra. Anamitra's son was Nimna, who begot Satrajita and Prasena. Anamitra's other son Sini begot Satyaka, whose son was Yuyudhana, whose son was Jaya, who begot Kuni, whose son was Yugandhara. Anamitra had a third son, too – another Vrishni.

This Vrishni's sons were Svaphalka and Chitraratha. Svaphalka married Gandini; their sons were Akrura and twelve others – Asanga, Sarameya, Mridura, Mriduvit, Giri, Dharmavriddha, Sukarma, Kshetropeksha, Arimardana, Shatrughna, Gandhamada and Pratibahu. These also had a sister, Suchira.

Akruru's two sons were Devavan and Upadeva. Chitraratha had numerous princes, the eldest of them being Prithu and Viduratha. All these are Vrishnis.

Andhaka's sons were Kukura, Bhajamana, Suchi and Kambalabarhishta. Kukura's son was Vahni, who begot Viloma. Viloma's son was Kapotaroma, whose son was Anu, well known for his great friendship with the Gandharva Tumburu. Anu's son was Andhaka, who begot Dundubhi, whose son was Aridyota, whose son was Punarvasu.

Punarvasu's son was Ahuka and his daughter was Ahuki. Ahuka begot Devaka and Ugrasena. Devaka's sons were Devavan, Upadeva, Sudeva and Devavardhana. Besides, Devaka had seven sisters called Dhritadevaa, Shantidevaa, Upadevaa, Devarakshitaa, Sahadevaa and Devaki. Vasudeva married all seven.

Ugrasena had nine sons – Kamsa, Sunama, Nyagrodha, Kanka, Shanku, Suhu, Rashtrapala, Srishti and Tushtiman. Vasudeva's younger brothers married Ugrasena's daughters, whose names were Kamsaa, Kamsavati, Kankaa, Surabhu and Rashtrapalika.

Viduratha's son was Soora and Bhajaman was Soora's son. Bhajaman's son was Sini, who begot Swayambhoja, who begot Hridika, whose sons were Devabahu, Shatadhanush and Kritavarman.

Devamidha's son Sorra married Marishaa, and upon her, he begot ten kshatriya princes – Vasudeva, Devabhaga, Devasravas, Anaka, Srinjaya, Syamaka, Kanka, Samika, Vatsaka and Vrika.

When Vasudeva was born, the Devas beat out unearthly rhythms in the sky on their drums: aanakas and dundubhis. The child was also called Aanakadundubhi, and he was to become the terrestrial father of Hari's Avatara, the blessed Sri Krishna.

Soora has five daughters, as well – Prithaa, Srutadevaa, Srutakirti, Srutasravaa and Rajadhidevi. Soora gave his eldest daughter Prithaa to his cousin Kuntibhoja, who had no children and grieved terribly over his lack. So delighted was Kuntibhoja that he named his adopted daughter Kunti.

Prithaa once delighted the Rishi Durvasa so much, by serving him when he visited Kuntibhoja's palace, that the Sage granted her a boon. He taught her the hermetic Devahuti, a mantra for summoning the Devas. Kunti did not quite believe in the occult gift she had received and one day summoned Surya Deva by chanting the secret words.

To the young princess' astonishment, the Sun God stood before her immediately, blazing. She was terrified and mumbled, 'Lord, I was only testing the Devahuti vidya. I beg you, forgive me and leave now, for I am afraid!'

But the Sun God said, 'You cannot summon a Deva in vain. Did the Rishi not tell you that this is a mantra for childbearing? You shall bear my son, and when he is born you shall be a virgin again.'

Surya Deva took young Prithaa, in her chamber at dawn, and having made her pregnant, he vanished. Her child, the Devaputra, was born immediately, painlessly, and he was as splendid as his divine sire. She felt herself a virgin again. Kunti was now frightened of public censure, that she had become a mother before she wed. She floated her brilliant baby down the river, which flowed past the bottom of the palace garden, in a wooden box.

Later, she was given in marriage to Pandu, and O Parikshit, he was your great grandsire, of unwavering dharma.

Vriddhasrama, the king of Karusha, married Prithaa's sister Srutadevaa. Vishnu's dwarapalaka Vijaya – whom Sanaka and the other Rishis had once cursed to three demonic births in the world – was born as her son Dantavakra.

Kunti's third sister Srutakirti married Dhrishtaketu, the king of the Kekayas. He begot five sons on her, who became renowned as the Kaikayas, powerful kshatriyas. Kunti's sister Rajadhidevi married Jayasena, king of Avanti, and their sons were Vinda and Anuvinda. The last sister, Srutasravaa, married Damaghosa, the king of Chedi. Their mighty and evil son, whose birth we have seen, was Sishupala."

Pausing but briefly, Suka continued, "Devabhaga married Kamsaa, and their sons were Chitraketu and Brihadbala. Devasravas married Kamsavati, and their princes were Suvira and Ishuman. Aanaka married Kankaa and they begot Satyajit and Purujit.

Srinjaya married Rashtrapali and their sons were Vrisha, Durmarshana and their brothers. Syamaka married Surabhumi and sired Harikesha and Hiranyaksha in her. Vatsaka took the Apsara Misrakesi, and their children were Vrika and his siblings. Virka's wife was Durvakshi; they had several sons, the first of whom were Takhsa, Pushkara and Sala.

Sudamini married Samika and she bore him Sumitra, Arjuna, Pala and their brothers. Ritadhama and Jaya were Kanka's sons by Karnikaa.

Soora's son Vasudeva married Devaki, Pauravi, Rohini, Bhadra, Madira, Rochana, Kausalya and Ila. By Rohini, his sons were Bala, Gada, Sarana, Durmada, Vipula, Dhruva and Krita.

By Pauravi, it is told, he begot twelve children, of whom Bhuta, Subhadra, Bhadravahan and Bhadra were four. By Madira, he begot Nanda, Upananda, Kritaka and Sura. Kausalya had just Kesin, who was the joy of his clan.

Rochana bore Vasudeva Hasta, Hemangada and other sons as well. Upon Ila, Vasudeva sired Urulvalka and other great Yadava chieftains. By another wife Dhritadevaa, Aanakadundubhi begot just one son, Viprishta. By Shantidevaa, he sired Srama, Pratisruta and some others, too, O King.

Upadevaa's sons were ten kings, the eldest of them being Kalpavarsha. Sridevaa had six sons – Vasu, Hamsa, Suvamsa and three others, whose names are lost. By Devarakshitaa, Vasudeva begot nine sons, Gada and his brothers; by Sahadevaa he had eight princes, the best known among them being Puruvisruta.

Even as Dharma Deva begot eight sons, the Vasus, the noble Vasudeva begot eight sons on Devaki. These were Kirtimat, Sushena, Bhadrasena, Riju, Sammardana, Bhadra and Samkarshana, who was an incarnation of Sesha, the lord of serpents, and the eighth was an Avatara of Hari himself – Krishna. Their daughter was the blessed Subhadra: your grandmother, O Rajan!

Yada yade dharmasya kshayo vriddhishva paapmanah, tada tu Bhagavaneesha Atmanam Srijate Hari...

Whenever dharma declines in the world and sinfulness dominates, the Lord Hari incarnates on earth.

The only reason he comes is his own divine sport, his will; for isn't he the one that controls the universe of maya? He is unattached, pervasive and the final witness. He who does everything for the love of his jivas – his incarnation into the world is surely not because of karma.

He comes to maintain order in the cycle, creation, nurture and destruction on one hand, and on the other to save his creatures from this long cycle of delusion, to help them find eternal ecstasy within their own souls.

When Vishnu incarnated himself as Krishna (and Balarama with him), he that slew the Asura Madhu performed marvels that even the Devas could not dream of accomplishing. He removed the evil burden of the Earth – of the numberless demons that tyrannised her and their immense and monstrous armies. Besides, he spread his grace through the world for a hundred years. So even the beings of the dreadful kali yuga will find faith and relief from the blindness of the spirit and the sorrow that enfolds them in the dark age.

He has left his magnificent legends, as a potent blessing to his bhaktas. Why, if a man of good instincts sips just a palmful of the waters from the river of Krishna's fame, his sacred deeds, he will break the bonds of karma.

So beautiful, so irresistible was Krishna, in every limb, that he enthralled all who set eyes on him, all the world – the Bhojas, the Vrishnis, the Andhakas, the Madhus, Surasenas, Dasarhas, Kauravas, Srinjayas, and of course, the Pandavas. His smile bewitched them; his exquisite voice and speech captivated their souls; and what to say of his incredible deeds?

The people looked at him and drank the divine sight of him into their souls, and it was amrita for them. It is told that, as they gazed upon Krishna, if they blinked they were annoyed that their rapture was interrupted for even a moment. He was stunning – his shining face set off by his fish-shaped earrings, his dazzling, ambiguous and teasing smile and the sheer bliss that was always in his look, which was so enthralling.

When he was born, he showed himself four-armed and unearthly, as Vishnu, but then assumed the form of a human infant. When he was not a day old, he left his father's home for Vraja, where he grew up as Yasodha's foster-son, among Nanda's gypsy cowherds, the gopas.

He gave the people of Vraja everything their hearts wanted, why to have him among them was more than enough. He killed more than one demon, as a child and as he grew in the wild places. He brought joy to the gopi women, making love to them when he was a youth. Then he returned to Mathura, and later ruled Dwaraka in the sea.

Many wives he married and had numerous sons by them. Several yagnas he performed, at which he had only himself to worship – the way of the Avatara, the way for bhaktas of the evil times to come.

Most of all, he came to rid the Earth of her burden of evil, in the form of millions of demons born into the world as violent kshatriyas. He stoked the greatest war of the age between the forces of good and evil, at which Yudhishtira's Pandava legions decimated the Kauravas and their immense host. With just his look, Krishna condemned the enemy to die.

He gave victory to Yudhishtira, and revealed the Ultimate Truth to Uddhava. Having accomplished everything that he was born to do, Krishna left the world and resumed his cosmic and transcendent Form, his Viswarupa," the blessed Sri Suka said to King Parikshit.

Even after he has composed the awesome *Mahabharata*, the Maharishi Vyasa finds no peace.

Narada Muni says to him, 'You have described the human life, its strife and its ends, but you have not yet described the Lord himself. You must turn your great gift to that task; only then will you find peace.'

Veda Vyasa composes the *Bhagavata Purana*. He teaches it to his illumined son Suka, who narrates the 'Secret Purana' to King Parikshit on the banks of the Ganga.

No other Indian scripture claims that it can bestow moksha merely by being heard; but the *Bhagavata Purana* is a living embodiment of the Lord Narayana.

Just before Krishna leaves the world, Uddhava says to him, 'The kali yuga has begun and evil will rise up and seize the earth. Who will be our light in the gathering night? Leave us a tangible form, Lord, in which we can find you, touch you, and be near you.'

Krishna enters the *Bhagavata Purana*: to read this amrita Purana is to be with Krishna. It consumes the sins of a million lives, it bestows untold fortune, and it is said to be the rarest treasure on earth.

This book is a full literary rendering of the *Bhagavata Purana*, bringing all the wonder, wisdom and grace of the Book of God to the modern reader.

Ramesh Menon was born in 1951 in New Delhi. He has retold the *Siva Purana* and the *Devi Bhagavatam*, and written modern renderings of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. He has also translated the *Bhagavad Gita*.

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